



**ERIC  
BRANDT**

**VIVO  
RECKONING**

Book #1 of the Pax Globus Anthology

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# **VIVO RECKONING**

Eric Brandt

A republic, if you can keep it.

# Prologue

The ocean fell upon the beach that morning with the malice of a countdown to national suicide. Helicopters buzzed over the checkered suburbs and passed eastward on their descent to the oceanfront estates and artificial isles. The aircraft blew aside patio furniture with rotor wash as skids slammed into roof tiles. Charleston hung in the distance; its low skyline dominated by smoke. Another bang reverberated across the land, punctuating the battle within. Fort Sumter faced the sea, a relic of the past, its decaying barricades steeped in the memory of the men who had fallen there nearly two and a half centuries ago — a harbinger of the sea of troubles that awaited the divided nation.

Across the bay on Sullivan’s Island, where batteries once fired on encroaching Union ships, the tall windows of 2101 Pettigrew St. reflected the crimson streak of the horizon. Figures within dashed past overturned furniture and curtains billowing with the Atlantic breeze. Shattered glass crunched underfoot. Some carried duffle bags to the helicopter waiting on the roof as others brought computers and stacks of paper outside to burn barrels on the wraparound patio. Flames danced in the green pool water as the wind carried the smoke inland, staining the mansion’s marble columns. Beach towels and discarded swimsuits collected in the corners. Empty wine bottles littered the yard and glinted in the new dawn.

In the study on the second floor, a dead body lay face-down on the carpet, having suffered a headshot at close range. Two collaborators, a man and a woman, tapped away on computers set atop the shattered glass surface of a once opulent desk. Blood dripped down the wall behind them. The woman, Sydney, sat at the desk. Her male counterpart stood over her with bullet holes in his shirt. The web gear on his chest clashed with his civilian attire. She typed slowly with her left hand, her right shoulder having been shattered. Sleeplessness circled her eyes.

“Did the upload make it?” he asked.



“I don’t know,” Sydney replied, hopeful but also doubtful, given all they’d been through.

“How long did you choose?”

She looked up at him and whispered a one-word answer.

He breathed out an exhausted sigh. She was relieved and self-assured.

As they left the room, he capped a translucent cylinder resting on the table beside the computer — a cell culture. The pink splotches darkened as they slid into the shadow of his pocket.

Leaving the computers behind, the pair exited through the rear terrace and headed for the sea. Limping, she leaned on him for support as they crossed the overgrown and trashed lawn. Thrust battered the palms ahead as the helicopter departed the roof. The craft flew low, skimming the trees to evade the long gaze of shipborne radars, only to explode over the shallows moments later with a bright flash from the sky — an air-to-air laser. Shrapnel rained onto the beachfront. The omnipresent howl of unseen interceptors thundered over the coast as the invisible shroud of air superiority engulfed them. Hundred-dollar bills and flakes of charred canvas dispersed with the debris, becoming one with the waves and washing back to shore.

Within the house, a new figure emerged through the front door, a human head atop a seven-foot-tall technological frame: Task Force Chief Kauffman. His limbs were clad in carbon fiber panels covering the gaps in the optimized structures of skeletal alloy that replaced them. In the grip of his steel gauntlets was a service rifle colored in earth tones that contrasted with his ghoulish form. The house occupants broke in terror at the sight of him. He grimaced at their cowardice. He could have shot them, as all were combatants by the rules of engagement. He stayed his hand, knowing that they would squeal before the military tribunals established in the wake of the conflict, allowing his enforcers to thoroughly uproot the depths of corruption that had grown in the heart of that outlaw regime. But justice could only be done if the United States survived the war. If he failed, and the populations of the eastern seaboard were obliterated, he would terminate all who remained.

His priority was to determine if the nation's fate had been sealed. A drone feed piped straight into his visual cortex showed two perpetrators, the man and the woman, exiting the house through the rear. They had nowhere to run.

Before pursuing them, he tore through the house until he came upon the study. There, he found the dead body and the abandoned computers. He inspected their screens and swore. What was done had been done.

"Report," he barked over comms, addressing the remaining Northern units in the area. Many had fallen to foreign legion mercenaries on the island's avenue of approach. The remaining elements had dispersed to search the nearby residences.

The soldiers answered in the negative. There were no other communications centers in the adjacent buildings.

"Madame President," he said gravely. "We were unable to stop the threat."

"Very well," replied President Rumsfeld with a heavy sigh. The situation room was filled with distraught murmurs. "It seems that your faith in John was misplaced."

"Indeed, ma'am," he said. He left the room to apprehend the couple. "My apologies."

"I'll prepare the country for bad news." The channel went silent. Hundreds of miles north, the call went out for people to shelter in place.

Outside, Sydney collapsed onto the sand behind John. She felt her injured shoulder as she watched him with compassion. He proceeded forward and waded into the cold saltwater. He took out the cell culture. He was done fighting for ideals, he decided, and threw it as far as he could. The ocean consumed the dish, sterilizing it completely with its primordial embrace.

"Goodbye," John said, his eyes lingering on the waves. He rejoined the woman.

Kauffman's goliath form trudged across the grassy dunes as he approached John and Sydney from behind. The sun danced across the manmade surfaces of his arm, revealing dark, laser-etched engravings on the shoulder panel: All fifty stars and the original thirteen stripes, below which was the logo, *United*

*Dynamics Land Systems*. Fresh, white inventory stickers adorned the limb, displaying black barcodes and serial numbers with edges unpeeled.

Remorse and disappointment stirred within him. The Washington elite was born anew with every generation, the successors carrying the torch of liberalism further into the dark night of the future, striving to perfect the Union. Though, it was an institution no less flawed than any other, for its servants were as human as anyone else, prone to temptation and sin, vulnerable to desperation. Only those of great conscience, such as he, could be trusted to deliver the country its bright future. And only under fire could the mettle of one's soul genuinely be tested. John had failed the test. It was a shame that it had happened so catastrophically.

The beach dwellers sat with their backs facing him. Kauffman raised his weapon as if to shoot them unawares. "Don't move," he growled, only to circle around in front of them, his rifle trained on John. He didn't know what the man would do given the depths of his grief. John had tried to kill him once already. If the worst came to pass, Kauffman would execute both on the spot.

"How does it feel to betray your country?" he sneered.

"How does it feel to betray humanity?" replied Sydney, fear and defiance in her eyes.

John stared past the soldier, out to sea and into the empty horizon, where he witnessed the death of the nation.





## **PART 1: THE NORTH**

# 1

*Six weeks before.*

The soft fabric of the doctor's shoe covers swished against the lifeless, industrial-grade carpet that furnished the waiting room. John Bates, cardiac surgeon, approached the family in the corner with a heavy heart. He was used to being the bearer of bad news. The family of Patient 1249 noticed as he stalked toward them. The husband and wife regarded him with anxious eyes above expressionless surgical masks. Their son sat between them, fixated on his mobile device, watching a young wingsuit diver with terminal cancer fall to his death. The diver's outstretched limbs grazed closer and closer to the fatal edges of rocky outcroppings and wayward pines. He carried on falling as he had fallen through the tragedies of modernity, through the many ills and diseases that befell young people, wearing the threads of life threadbare until the medical system, even with its starkest and most advanced implements, funded by the depthless coffers of insurance companies, could save them no more.

Some practitioners enjoyed a dire prognosis. It meant that the work of the profession was unending. Many more delivered it impersonally, through pamphlets and care plans written by language models responding to grief with terminological precision. Instead, John took a few precious minutes to visit the families. Sometimes, he questioned whether it was worth it. But he'd been there once before, in the shadow of the monolithic system, immersed in grief.

The parents stood. Tears appeared in the mother's eyes. Their son scrolled onward to a video of a young woman posing in her underwear with a bile-filled bag at her abdomen, flaunting the last of her beauty before oblivion.

\* \* \*

Patient 1249, a woman in her late twenties, was processed like any other. Deep within the hospital, the hermetically sealed pods originated from the far end of the corridor, processing with the speed of pallbearers down its length, driven by industrial casters with motors barely audible above the roaring ventilation system that threatened to take one's breath away. The pods were clad in white with a polycarbonate dome blurring the occupant within. Their gown would be incinerated afterward, along with the discarded flesh. They resided in a twilight world as the atmospheric system titrated a gaseous anesthetic. Every now and then, a pod would divert from the hall down another corridor to a separate wing of the facility.

The system of pods had been developed by Gaumard 2054 in response to the global outbreak of XRSA, a staph variant thought to have been released by Pakistan in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Indo-Pakistan war to further incapacitate the Bangladeshi and Indian armed forces. In a few years, XRSA could be found in half of the nursing homes and doctor's offices in America. Though the infection was eventually contained, it was never fully eradicated, and measures taken for its mitigation remained in place.

The world outside darkened as 1249 was diverted for the cardiopathy wing. She felt as if her body was a sinking ship, her mind a room filled with seawater. Her last memory as she fell unconscious was of the circle of masked figures beyond the dome looking upon her like a ring of gargoyles.

1249 fell asleep on schedule. The team of technicians opened the pod and got to work preparing her for surgery. They attached a sensor suite to her wrist, inserted an IV, and tucked her long brown hair into a cap. Finally, they peeled back the front of her gown, revealing the structure of her thoracic cage, bones covered by just a thin layer of white skin. The techs peeled and placed lengths of orange tape covered in black dots around her sternum, creating a target area for the surgical vision system. They sealed the capsule, and onward she went down another corridor.

In the next chamber, an attending nurse in an isolation gown entered carrying a stainless-steel tray. Upon the tray was a bagged object, the barcode



of which she scanned before removing the item and setting it on a small side table in the operating area. The item was a black orb with protruding tubules, *Xinjiang Ind.* inscribed on its surface. She stepped aside and waited with hands clasped. The table was attached, like the branch of a tree, to a rectangular tower that dominated the room. Overhead, a canopy of surgical implements dangled — glistening steel and hollow diodes interspersed with cutters and laparoscopic manipulators. At its center resided a cluster of lidless eyes hungry for human flesh. In the shadow of the machine's casement, opposite the patient area, John sat and snaked a cable beneath his collar, toward the back of his neck. The connector magnetically aligned with a datalink beneath his skin. His mask swelled as he exhaled. The canopy of instruments came alive, lowering themselves gently into position with an auto-sterilizing hiss.

Plastic curtains rasped against the pod as it slid into the room. The attending nurse unlatched the pod's dome and placed an inhalation mask on the girl's mouth.

The surgical arms descended and went to work. Steam rose from the enclosure as a laser etched her ribs. Blood spiraled up the vacuum tubes. One gripper removed her sternum while the other inserted a chest spreader, opening a window to her thoracic cavity and the pleural membrane beneath that swelled with her every breath.

Without hesitation, John plunged in his knife. The flesh parted like a curtain, revealing the ensemble within. Under the intense illumination, her lung membranes appeared pale pink, likely due to undiagnosed allergic alveolitis. He mentally noted it for her medical records. He turned to her heart. The pericardium was a yellowish white from the growth of fibrin strands and the presence of effusion — both symptoms of pericarditis. It was a classic case of the immune system attacking the heart, one that was becoming more common by the year. Medical boards had discussed preemptive heart replacements for some patients, a procedure in line with the removal of wisdom teeth. John thought it unnecessary and said as much to his colleagues. However, the system would push its agenda regardless of his opinion.

Immersed within her chest cavity, he maneuvered the surgical implements as if they were extensions of his own body, snipping the SVC and IVC, then the pulmonary arteries, and finally the aorta, before culling the ligaments attaching the heart to the cavity walls and the cardiac plexus. His first course of action after removal was to attach the patented *Xinjiang* datalink, which would allow the artificial heart to receive input from her nervous system. The chip's biopolymer fused with her cells in a white, synthetic mass. Seconds later, a robotic arm retrieved the replacement heart from the platter and suspended it within the chest cavity. John connected the vessels one by one. As soon as everything had fused, he withdrew himself from the cavity and began reattaching her sternum. A transfusion pump whirred as it replaced lost fluid.

\* \* \*

John brought the family out of the waiting room to the balcony outside, where he could address them unmasked. On the street below, protestors and the uninsured mingled behind concrete barriers and fences guarded by federal officers.

“There was a complication?” guessed the mother, clinging to her husband. The daughter was their firstborn but their third attempt at life. The previous two succumbed to fetal anencephaly — failure to develop the nervous system — which meant mandatory abortion under the 28<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

“No,” replied John, to their relief. “The surgery was successful. But it won't be her last.” He then explained the pericarditis and alveolitis he'd found in her and the complications that would arise in the future. The boy put away his device to absorb the bad news. The procedures would be covered by the family's platinum insurance, but that's not what worried them. Despite the ubiquity of surgery and the state-sponsored assurances of safety, disgust at mutilating the body persevered. Every cut was penance for the crimes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

John admired the family for their courage. Like many Americans, they would fight until their last end, using all means necessary.

He wished his daughter had the same attitude. Instead, she seemed to see death as an opportunity.

He joined the family briefly as they visited their daughter in the recovery room, despite the price he would pay for every minute spent outside the OR. For the first time, he saw 1249 as more than a charted collection of bodily systems, more than an abstract rendering beneath his eyelids. She was an outwardly beautiful young woman crumbling from within. She reminded him of his late wife, Pam. And she reminded him of Nola.

## 2

John Bates clocked out at six P.M. — his usual time — exiting through the skyway passing over Albany Street to the parking garage. Boston Medical Center was a cluster of buildings consuming two city blocks, each interconnected structure a reflection of the previous era, and the bland, industrial pragmatism that reflected an enduring emphasis on profits. Once clear of the high contagion zone — marked by a blue line on the floor — he removed his surgical mask and inhaled the tart city musk. Still, it was a violation of federal mandate, but a welcome change from smelling his own breath.

Beyond the glass, the street below was crowded with the usual throng of protesters, stretching as far as the eye could see and threatening to block the entrance to the emergency department. Sullen eyes peered out from behind facial coverings. They clung to the fences surrounding the derelict Boston University campus, where John had done his bachelor's twenty years prior. There were not enough young people to sustain so many institutions.

He flinched as an egg exploded against the glass. It was followed by another. The pair of federal officers guarding the department entrance jumped into action, beating the offenders with nightsticks until they lay prostrate on the sidewalk. The crowd covered before them.

The protesters' cause needed no words. They either had chronic disease or knew someone who did. John continued to the garage. To them, he was another figure in a tie and slacks, another one-percenter running away from the needs of the many. He had concluded that his feelings about such people didn't matter in the grand scheme of things. There were only so many organs, so many operating rooms. Corporations set the prices. Death had always been part of the human experience.

His black Mercedes Cabriolet spiraled down the parking garage of its own accord, passing the other imports parked in the lot. He waved to the security

guard at the exit booth. The street beyond was surrounded by fencing to keep protesters at bay. The car accelerated toward an intersection on the way to I-93, the road north, out of the city.

It was his daughter's birthday. They hadn't texted in months, much less spoken, so he thought he would pay her a visit. She lived in the Carlisle Independent Permaculture Precinct, known as the CIPP ('sip'), a supposed enclave from the long arm of the government. They wouldn't appreciate his surprise arrival, but he didn't give a damn. She was his daughter.

Muted yelling came from beyond the shell of his car. The Mercedes slammed to a halt.

John looked up from the bank account information on his phone just in time to see a black-clad figure smack into his driver-side door. The man's breath condensed onto the tinted window.

"I'm a veteran," the man shouted, exasperated. "Please, I'm a veteran!" Federal officers pulled him off of John's car and dragged him toward the fence. They pressed him to the pavement and applied restraints. The Mercedes resumed its journey to the highway.

John's eyes returned to his phone, and he made a withdrawal. He felt a pang for the man, as he did for the other protestors, but it was dulled the magnitude of suffering in the world, and by his own. Outside his duty as a practitioner, he had long given up on the notion of love between neighbors, much less strangers. That love was like a weed in a parking lot, sporadic and fleeting in a realm of indifference.

\* \* \*

It was unclear as to who had struck first: The Chinese, who were losing a decade-long war in the South China sea, the Americans over the emergence of the Pan-Eurasian economic block, the Israelis over the firebombing of Jerusalem, or any one of the bad actors in the proxy wars of North Africa. The enzyme, integrase, was the 21st-century equivalent of plutonium, yet it

received hardly as many headlines. The term ‘human resources’ took on new meaning as declining demography meant that populations became the primary target of military strategists. Superspreaders were the product-improvement of suicide bombers as bad actors sought to maximize collateral damage while maintaining asset values. As weapons of mass destruction, ballistic missiles follow traceable trajectories, unlike lethal strains of streptococcus. No one knew who to blame for the apocalypse.

In the previous era, people took life for granted. A scraped knee was bandaided over. Couples merely decided to have children. Cancer was a concern for the elderly. Then, after global biowarfare, the creation and sustainment of life became more difficult. It began with reports of anencephaly — babies born without functional brains — from doctors in Zimbabwe. Experts suggested that the disease was the result of a new bioweapon, but alternative experts argued that it was something more pernicious. It seemed that, in the exchange of viruses and vaccines, something fundamental in the human biome was broken, beyond genes, beyond organs, beyond the immune system. All the world’s scientists had been unable to put humanity back together again. World War 3 wasn’t the nuclear holocaust as predicted; it was a slow burn across hospital wards that had, over several generations, consumed just as many lives.

A fractured world emerged from the fallout. In some places, nation-states fell as dictators rose to power. In others, independent communities like the CIPP took root as bulwarks against old authority where it survived. Everywhere, people looked to gods abandoned or philosophers long dead, seeking refuge in the detritus of the past, in late words and ideas buried in the sediment of history, forbidden or forgotten to one day be reified by the new iconoclasts.

An expanse of trees surrounded the CIPP, serving as a natural barrier to the highway and derelict suburbs beyond. A dirt road extended from the foliage like an umbilical cord through browning fallow and ranks of solar panels to a cluster of buildings at their center. Children clambered up the

panels to wipe the dust and leaves away, happy faces uncovered, supervised by older siblings with garden hoses.

Atop a pitched roof, beneath a poncho held up by tree branches and paracord, a lookout with a hunting rifle trained his scope on the fancy black sedan kicking up dust as it approached them.

“We expecting anyone?” asked the older brother with the rifle. He spat out a wad of gum, which rolled down the shingles and into the gutter below as he adjusted his aim.

“Nope,” said the younger, who was barely into his teens, after he consulted the names in the logbook.

“Should I take ‘em out?” the elder asked, flipping off the safety. He licked his lips in anticipation, imagining shooting the tire just as the car rounded the next bend in the road, causing it to flip and tumble, tousling the people inside, just as he’d seen in the action movies the adults didn’t allow them to watch. He guessed that they were government agents serving a warrant for something petty, such as water theft or supposed tax evasion.

The younger thought better of it and radioed management.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake!” said the elder upon hearing the reply. He lowered his gun. The sedan entered the solar field.

John had visited the eco-village once before, more than a year prior. He was surprised by the number of children climbing up and down the aluminum supports and high-voltage conduit as if it was playground equipment. Further on, others kicked a soccer ball between the struts. The CIPP had grown. They stared at his car as it passed, for they hadn’t seen anything other than farm equipment in the village for quite some time. After so many years, the precinct was still under development, with tents surrounded by scrub gardens still crowding the outskirts. Palisades cobbled together from sheet metal and rice bags filled with sand studded the perimeter. The defenses were accompanied by dugouts and a few bunkers. Old security cameras, no doubt liberated from abandoned storefronts, hung from telephone pole stalks. John pulled into the center of town, parking in front of city hall, the town’s bastion, a fortified

structure with walls made of dirt-filled tires and a concrete roof. Nearby, above-ground water tanks sat covered in algae.

One of the leaders walked out to greet him, pistol tucked into his waistband and checkered flannel rolled up to his elbows, revealing sturdy forearms hardened through years of manual labor. He was Gus, a man in his late twenties or early thirties, rugged but with long, bohemian hair. “You can’t show up unannounced,” he said to John, who had exited his car.

“Deport me, then,” said John. It was a ridiculous notion, as the CIPP accepted people of all backgrounds, even fugitives.

“We’ll chop you up and feed you to the pigs instead.”

John laughed. It seemed like a joke, but he didn’t know the man that well. He’d only met him once, a couple of years ago, when Nola ran away from home after graduating high school, only to land in that godforsaken place. “I’m sure Nola would like that,” he said.

Gus smiled weakly. “Not sure if she wants to see you.”

“I’m her dad. It’s her birthday. Where is she?”

“Let me talk to her,” Gus said.

“I’ll talk to her,” said John, pushing past him. He headed in the direction of Nola’s dwelling, down the dirt boulevard, toward the capillary paths that branched between clusters of shipping container homes.

“She isn’t home,” Gus called after him. He led John down a different path.

They walked through the compound, passing the sheet metal granary, past the garage filled with heavy-duty clunkers on jack stands, through another cluster of shipping containers. Children perched on ladders with brushes in hand. Colors were smeared across their fingers and faces. The murals they painted, distorted by corrugated metal and a child’s imagination, depicted moments in American history — Washington’s crossing of the Delaware. The Boston Tea Party. The Berlin airlift. The Statue of Liberty. The conquest of the West. The Trail of Tears. The Fetterman Massacre. Recent history, it seemed, had yet to enter their imagination.



“An initiative to educate the youth about how great our country was,” Gus explained.

“You’ll let them leave the CIPP?” asked John. The place struck him as more of a cult than anything else.

“We’re not monsters, John. As our children grow, they’ll want to integrate into society. We’re in talks with activists and legislators to make that happen. They’ll take our ideals with them and change things one small decision at a time.”

It sounded like a twisted version of his wife’s dream. John wondered if Nola had something to do with it.

They came upon a cluster of drab homes on the outskirts touched by rust and untouched by culture. Entering one, Gus pushed aside soiled blankets covering the entryway, leading John into a dim interior that smelled of moisture and rampant oxidation. It failed to mask the odor of sweat and human excrement. Light emanated through a propped-open panel. Floor planks sagged underfoot. In the darkness, John could make out a few RV appliances and a collection of items that looked like they belonged in a junkyard. He felt a mixture of pity and disgust at the whole situation, as if things weren’t bad enough already, that modern Americans would willingly subject themselves to such third-world conditions. Their way of life was a form of childish rebellion, according to him. A lack of gratitude. Many villagers were, like his daughter, neither impoverished nor persecuted, but children of the affluent, driven, in his view, by the naive belief that defecating in a can somehow helped solve the world’s problems. Foregoing indoor plumbing wasn’t fighting for freedom, thought John, it was a way of finding cholera. So went his arguments with his daughter.

Nola’s voice echoed from the next chamber: “Push, dammit!” Another woman’s cries echoed through the container. Gus and John hurried into the second container. Beneath naked light strips tacked to the ceiling was a young woman on a mattress, tears streaming down her cheeks, knees elevated, and legs spread with Nola situated between them. Nola’s long hair was tied back

in a voluminous bun. Her gloved hands were covered in the woman's fluids. She glared at the two men staring in the doorway.

"Sorry..." said Gus, bumping into John. "Didn't realize..."

She then recognized her father standing behind him. In that moment, John forgot about their dingy surroundings. He hadn't been aware that Nola had taken up midwifery. A rare smile touched his lips.

"Hi, Dad," said Nola, both annoyed and elated, for she could see the approval on his face.

The woman began hyperventilating. "It's not going..."

"It'll come," Nola reassured her.

"What's wrong?" asked John. He pushed past Gus and knelt next to the patient.

"Baby is sideways," Nola replied curtly.

*Transverse* was the correct term — he had taken three credits of obstetrics in medical school as an elective — but he refrained from correcting her. "May I?" he asked, reaching out to feel her stomach. Nola hesitantly got out of his way. It had been decades since he'd done that kind of thing. He took off his wedding band and gently palpated the area, discerning the location of the head, the limbs, and the abdomen.

"Look, I know what to do," Nola said, edging him out of the way. "I thought it would straighten itself out but..."

"How many babies have you delivered?" he asked.

"Way more than you," she said with a dismissive laugh.

"This is a serious condition. She should get an ultrasound. Probably needs a C-section."

"No hospital!" the woman cried.

Nola gave him a look. "Dad, please."

John consulted the medical database on his phone. An automated voice began to describe the procedure for *external cephalic version (ECV)*. "A 50% success rate has been recorded in cases of..."

“Shut it!” commanded Nola. Gus grabbed John’s arm and began dragging him toward the doorway just as he hit the mute button.

He watched as Nola began to palpate the woman’s abdomen. There seemed to be a lot of vaginal bleeding, perhaps the start of a uterine rupture. He guessed that the CIPP didn’t have blood on hand or an IV to administer it with. There was also a chance of the umbilical cord preceding the fetus and getting pinched by the vaginal wall, starving it of oxygen. Two lives were on the line. John struggled to remain silent.

Nola palpated. A half-hour passed. The mother calmed, and Gus left to fetch her fresh water. When Nola’s hands grew tired, she allowed her father to take over. She leaned against the wall, massaging her knuckles, which were swollen with arthritis. The child kicked in protest of John’s fingers, to which all present laughed. The kicks were healthy and strong. John asked about the father. The woman didn’t know who it was. Until several months ago, before she’d found the CIPP, she’d been a sex worker. He suddenly wished he was wearing gloves. Sex work had been outlawed by the 28<sup>th</sup> Amendment, making it a lucrative industry. As with prohibition, law enforcement was fighting a losing battle. It was her first pregnancy. She meant to get an abortion but kept putting it off until she realized that she wanted the child to live. But, without an official birth certificate, it would be a non-person, unable to seek employment, get married, receive insurance, or much else. Without a forgery, or a constitutional amendment, the child would be stuck in the CIPP for the rest of their life.

Like modern Jamestowns, independent precincts had sprung up across the northeast with the same mission: to care for the tired, the poor, and the uninsured. John understood why Nola chose to join them, but he saw it as a fool’s errand. He hoped against hope that she would snap out of it. But that seemed less and less likely.

The girl moaned as she experienced a contraction.

“Uh, it’s my turn,” said Nola, standing over him. She handed him a phone. “Film it, would you?”

He accepted the device if only to get it out of his daughter's hands. It was already recording.

"Make sure I'm not in it," he muttered angrily.

"Sure, Dad."

Ignoring the viewfinder, John watched intently as she delivered the child. Delivery was not a difficult procedure, in his view, but she carried it out with the exactness of a trained medical professional. He was proud of her. But he also mourned the person she could have been, the good she could have done had she stayed the course. Instead, she became deluded with ideas of social justice and fear of her own mortality. She would have made an excellent nurse, physician's assistant, doctor even. It was his fault for exposing her to politics so early in life.

The baby came kicking and screaming. Nola wordlessly held it up to the camera, as if showing evidence to a jury.

Afterward, she rubbed her knuckles as she washed her hands. John watched as she scrubbed her fingers. The arthritis was a symptom of the same autoimmune condition that had taken Pam. Eventually, her body would attack its lymph nodes, and the disease would become terminal. As with his wife, she would become a bedridden husk, chronically sick from immunosuppressants and high on opiates, probably by her late thirties. Had they known Pam's disease would be so aggressive, they wouldn't have had Nola. But they were optimists back then.

The empty soap dispenser slurped on its dregs.

"How are your fingers?" he asked, before handing her the phone and scrubbing his hands with mostly water.

"Fine," she said quietly.

"Happy birthday," he said, smiling at her.

"Oh...yeah. Thanks." She left the container.

He felt a pang at her indifference. Like all fathers with daughters, he would forever see her as his little girl and expect the sweetness she had given him as

a child, the innocent love that erodes with time. He knew she would be vengeful and petty, yet a desperate part of him held out for that love.

Gus relayed the news of the birth and the new strong and healthy boy that was added to the tribe. A crowd had gathered outside. The mother emerged to applause, a shawl wrapped around her as she held the child close to her breast. Children brought flowers that they deposited at her feet. Women carried baskets of food. In the distance, celebratory gunshots rang out. Nola joined Gus in the audience, resting her head against his chest. He hugged her and kissed the top of her head. John clapped for all of them, hiding the sense of failure he felt being absent from his daughter's life. She had grown in the last couple of years, and he had missed all of it.

As the sun set, the CIPPers filled the firepit and fired up their barbeques. Moonshine and other homemade spirits circulated. A guitar strummed, punctuated by a barking dog, Yeller the Smeller, which chased down stray cornhole bags with reckless abandon. John remained despite feeling out of place. Every now and then, he caught a wary glance from one of the villagers.

The children, however, were curious about the newcomer.

"I'm a heart doctor, a surgeon," he explained to a young trio.

"Do you like it when you cut people open?" asked one.

John said he did it out of necessity.

"My dad says that you can't trust doctors. That you put flesh-eating bacteria in people if they don't pay their bills."

John sighed. "We don't do that...but your dad isn't completely wrong. You can't trust all doctors."

They asked about his car. He let them crawl all over the leather seats and push buttons.

Eventually, Nola rejoined him. She'd let her hair down, which fell all the way to her waist in a pleated curtain that caught mosquitoes. Her mane shimmered with the limp of her arthritic hips. Hopelessness rose within him. To his eyes, she looked feral and ragged, not like the formidable woman he'd imagined her becoming when she was a child. They sat by the fire in a pair of

faded recliners, drinking watery swill. He asked about her life, but she kept the answers impersonal.

“Last winter was pretty harsh. I’m sure you remember. The elders didn’t buy enough propane, and we had to move families from the containers into the hall and school. And then our well froze. We didn’t have enough fuel to heat both the homes and to melt snow. We’ve cleared pretty much all the trees on our lot, so we had to gather firewood again. The EPA came after us for that. There was a standoff — not the first time that’s happened. Luckily, no one got hurt. But something is bound to happen. Word is, they’ll be paying us a visit soon.”

John shook his head. There were homes with central heating and electricity just down the road.

“We’re a huge thorn in their side,” Nola added. “More and more villages are rising up across the country. They couldn’t stop us if they tried.”

“I don’t think you want them to try,” John replied sullenly. He changed the topic. “Your hands don’t look so good.”

“They’re no worse than they’ve ever been,” she said tersely.

“Your mother wasn’t this bad when I met her.”

“Look, if you’re going to ask me to be part of some big pharma experiment like you did with Mom, the answer is no.”

He touched her hand. “There might be a cure...”

“Thanks for coming for my birthday,” she said abruptly and stood.

“Nola, wait,” he said, touching her arm to stop her from leaving. He hesitated. “I wanted to say that I’m proud of you. And that I’m sorry for being so judgmental.” In his outstretched hand, he held \$5,000 in cash that he’d withdrawn on his way out of Boston. “Happy birthday.”

She ignored it. “Oh yeah? Judgmental? Because I remember you making me feel like shit for not being good enough. Because you didn’t think I was trying hard enough.”

John shook his head. “I only wanted you to live up to your potential. For you to have something to strive for...”

Holding back tears, she began limping away. Gus noticed and rushed forward to comfort her. John stood, feeling as if he'd botched a surgery. Gus glared at him over her shoulder.

She disappeared, leaving John to contemplate next to the fire, amidst the cheerful rabble of the villagers and the incessant strumming. He thought back to their arguments, to their shouting matches about life and their place within it. It was obvious to him that she had been poisoned by her peers, who in acceptance of their disease states had embraced death and cast aside any hope of becoming productive members of society. People needed goals to survive, especially in the face of adversity. That was his approach to life. Pam was the same. In accepting death, they had embraced life, if only to overcome despair. Nola's generation was not so resilient, and John couldn't help but see it as a failure of the culture.

Gus returned to the fire to speak with her father. The pistol was still tucked into his waistband.

Expecting the man to be angry with him, John got to his feet.

"Didn't mean to upset her," said John. Knowing he was her boyfriend, John felt doubly threatened, as if he was a new model slated to replace him.

"I know," Gus said calmly. He motioned for John to sit.

"How long have you been together?"

Gus thought a moment. "Two years?"

"Wow," John said. Nothing about Nola's texts or phone calls had indicated the relationship. He felt betrayed. But it was a betrayal of his own making.

"She's not doing well," Gus said, lighting a cigarette. "The disease is eating away at her. Last year, she started taking immunosuppressants, same that your wife took. They've been helping, but she took the last dose weeks ago. Supplier can't get ahold of 'em. Hasn't been good."

John wondered how they'd acquired the drugs and assumed that it was through the usual means. They were difficult to come by, even for practitioners, given the prevalence of autoimmunity in the general population.

Gus explained her night sweats and the excessive bleeding during her period. Her need for crutches in the winter.

“That’s how it went with her mother,” John said, “Fatigue, joint replacements, organ failure, dementia. By her thirty-sixth birthday, she was ninety biologically.” He shook his head as emotions he thought he’d buried resurfaced. “There isn’t a clear genetic vector. No obvious treatment.” The disease was simply dubbed ‘complex oculocraniosomatic syndrome.’

“Sounds like you’ve given up on her,” Gus remarked.

John worked to keep his cool. “We pursued every treatment modality available. She was on half the patient panels in the northeast.”

“How about the South?” asked Gus, rubbing his hands together. “I hear they have things that can cure any disease.”

“Might as well give her monkey blood,” John remarked with sarcasm.

“What’s that?” asked Gus, oblivious to the joke.

John didn’t bother explaining the history behind dermal merbromin — another example of quackery in medicine.

To John, all the Southern ideologues had to offer was bold claims and snake oil, but his opinion was founded on the cherry-picked soundbites and clips that managed to slip through the Great Firewall. Their marketing strategy was to entice the stupid and desperate to take part in revolutionary schemes. They needed bodies to fuel their industry and war machine, he thought. Not only was going to the South stupid, it was also impossible. The war with the North, declared forty years ago, ever since the passage of the 28<sup>th</sup> Amendment, was ongoing, as was the curtain of the demilitarized zone that kept the two halves of the country separated. Fixers were needed to get past the border defenses. One stood a better chance of emigrating to China.

Gus took a swig. “Good blood. Stem cells. Could cure her.”

John sighed. “A blood transfusion is about as likely to cure her as a bone marrow transplant is to fix a heart attack. And ‘stem cells’ are more accurately referred to as ‘placental derived factors.’ Whose placenta? How was it



harvested?” He had thought Gus was more sensible than the others, but he was just as insane. Of course, he had to be insane to run a camp like the CIPP.

“I think it’s better than anything big pharma can cook up. You people think you can control nature, but you’ve got it all wrong. We can’t control it. If we could, we’d have solved the whole mess by now.”

John considered telling him about the MIT nanite research he’d been following but decided against it. The man was illiterate in the field and lacked common sense. The nanites had been years in the making, and it seemed that one of the major players, Metabionic, would finally bring a product to market. He’d known Nola would benefit from it someday. That day, however, had come sooner than he’d thought. He grew angry at her silence about her symptoms. Then again, he understood why. Because she didn’t want him to come barging into her life, attempting to manage every aspect as if she was his perpetual patient.

“Don’t even think about taking her South,” he said to Gus. Crossing the border, getting shot, blown up, or worse, was the norm as far as he was concerned. Never mind what happened behind the closed doors of the radical theocracy.

“I was thinking of going it alone.”

John shook his head. But within his disappointment resided a hint of approval. At least he was willing to risk his life for her. At the end of the day, that was the most a father could expect of his daughter’s suitor. Nola could have chosen worse. The man’s foolhardiness reminded him of a regrettable aspect of himself: The despair he’d felt in his wife’s death, as he’d knelt at her bedside while she withered away, trapped in the grip of inaction, having exploited every viable avenue while remaining closed to others he considered outlandish. The South. The undiscovered country. Perhaps he should have given in to the propaganda and died in vain searching for a solution. That would have been valiant, in contrast with the despair that followed. If it hadn’t been for Nola, he might have done something radical — become one of those

desperate people. Now that Nola's life was in jeopardy, what did he have to lose?

John stood. "I need to look into things. Give me a day or so."

"All right. She doesn't have much time," Gus said, his gaze meeting John's. "I'm not going to let her die."

He left Nola's gift with him.

### 3

Bathed in the orange hue of the sunset, the trees fencing in the I-90 turnpike were like the walls of an artery conducting him westward. John dimmed the windshield to block the sun from his eyes. He returned to reading the MIT nanite research downloaded from the PubMed preprint server. It was by Rezni et al., a cohort at the cutting edge of the field. Some of the text echoed his undergraduate studies in microbiology, but much of it was inscrutable to him as a non-expert. As he read, he looked for clues as to whether the findings indicated that the promised treatment would help Nola. Rezni et al. discussed targeted Perforin release and its integration with the cytotoxic T lymphocyte (CTL) pathway. With the help of the medical database, he was able to make some sense of the concepts, but the question of its efficacy in Nola's case loomed as he read.

To his astonishment, she left him a message earlier: *“Dad, I’m sorry about the yesterday. I haven’t been feeling well. Come by anytime. Thank you for helping. Love you.”* He thought of calling her back but was unsure of what to say. In the end, he simply texted, saying he’d be there soon.

His destination was an estate in Berkshire — a party hosted by Joseph Wu, a well-known medical mogul, where all manner of clinicians, researchers, and salespeople would be present. It was the kind of hedonic networking event that all young and naive medical professionals felt entitled to after taking the Hippocratic Oath. He’d been to Wu’s estate before. Fresh out of his years of residency, he was eager to partake in the wining and dining promised to him. Not only was it the culmination of a decade of work and study, but it was a sign that he’d made it as a professional. However, over a dozen years later, he felt no pride at the prospect of indulgence. Especially since Pam’s death, he had come to see such people and events as deplorable. He wasn’t in it for himself anymore.

He had compiled a list of the thirty-nine co-authors in the Rezni et al. paper. Surely, at least one of them would be present that night. He’d also look

for another well-networked professional, his friend, Dr. Bill Rauch, board member of the Boston Surgical Society and co-chair of the MIT/Harvard Health Sciences and Technology division. He was an eternal ray of sunshine in the medicinal ruffraff. Professionally, they'd served on a few committees together. Personally, he was an old ally. Rauch had been instrumental in getting doctors involved with Pam's case. John, of course, had repaid Rauch with preferential treatment, by replacing both his and his wife's hearts. The man was a reliable fixture of such events.

He toyed with his wedding band, removing it from his finger, spinning and replacing it in an anxious cycle, a habit that hadn't faded with time. He doubted anyone would be able to enroll Nola in a clinical trial. It felt like he was fighting for life all over again, but this time he knew it was futile.

\* \* \*

The loud tapping of a wineglass brought John out of his stupor. The main bar in Wu's house was about as large as the emergency department nurse's station, with the dining hall around it the size of the whole department. Instead of gurneys and isolation gowns, the place was crowded with tuxedos and dresses. The sounds of aristocracy flowed from a string quartet situated in the corner. Their bows paused as Wu himself took to an elevated platform, eyes beaming, a smile upon his square and youthful face that was situated beneath a mane of slicked-back hair. "Gentlemen, ladies." The crystal chandeliers tinkled as they swayed with the evening breeze.

"Thank you for coming tonight. I like to say that, at Xinjiang Industry, we make life. But you *give* life. That is an important distinction. We have made many advances in biomedical technology, such as Zhong-Feng polymer, our most cutting-edge development, licensed to over fifty partners, which extended tissue compatibility beyond anything previously thought possible and placed Xinjiang at the forefront of tier-one manufacturers. Even so, the reciprocity that we celebrate here, on evenings like this, between the life

makers and the life-givers, is an advancement a thousand times more cherished than any technology. Cheers to you all!”

The people clapped and drank. John downed his second margarita of the night. Wu disappeared and the music resumed.

The bartender made another, selecting an ornate bottle of tequila from the shelving behind him, beside which were a series of replacement livers sans the biopolymer sheathing to show off their iridescent surfaces.

John had been at the party for over an hour and had yet to spot any of the co-authors. He scrolled through the profile pictures on his phone, glancing up every now and then to scan the faces around him. He could email the researchers later, but he felt his chances of success were highest if he met them face-to-face.

“Dr. Bates?”

He turned to find a man blindsiding him with an outstretched hand. He was an industry salesperson, the kind of guy hired to wine and dine practitioners like John to move product.

“Last we talked, I was with Telos Health, but now I’m with Salient Devices Inc.”

“Ah,” said John, vaguely recalling a conversation from a year ago.

“How are things?”

It was a genre John was all too familiar with, friendly banter to establish rapport that would later be used as leverage for talking shop. The approach was always the same, free drinks, a meal, something resembling friendship. Companies gave their representatives a blank check. Half the time, the salesperson was a woman whose mannerisms seemed to hint at something more than technical specs, implementation strategies, and industry trends. At first, he was thrilled to be their mark, but with time, he came to see the game for the clinical exchange that it was.

He told the rep he wasn’t interested. The man slipped him a business card.

Fresh martini in hand, John trekked back through the maze of corridors and rooms, passing through the kitchen, where an army of waitstaff conjured

a never-ending feast. He hadn't been upstairs and decided to look for the authors there. He ascended the hardwood staircase that swerved upward along the edge of the lobby like the rib of a giant mammal. Over the clamor of the crowded balcony, he heard a familiar voice, one Dr. Rauch. He was a balding man of short stature with a large nose, gesticulating as he talked, his drink threatening to slosh from its vessel.

"Freud got it right, I say. Religion is a coping mechanism for death anxiety," Rauch pronounced, to the rapt attention of those in his midst. "And as Professor Buchanan has suggested," he continued, gesturing to an elderly man in the ring, "it should be obliterated from the cultural canon of any sophisticated society."

Buchanan was a wiry man nearing seventy whose form-fitting suit harkened back to an elegant middle age. John flipped through his list as the men spoke. Buchanan wasn't an author.

"Obliterated?" asked one critically. "Open warfare would deepen the recession."

"It would have to be swift," said another.

"President Rumsfeld doesn't have the balls for it..." They chuckled.

"Ah!" said Rauch, noticing John, "Here's a man of reason! What would you do about the Southern issue?"

John hesitated. It was a broad question, and he didn't like being put on the spot. He was vaguely familiar with Rauch's political leanings, enough to know that he placed profits and the integrity of systems over wellbeing. Deep down, John was opposed to war and censorship, though he didn't want to alienate the man. Were Pam alive, he would have spoken his mind, but he had no such inclination that evening. "It seems like war is inevitable."

Buchanan cleared his throat. "We should start thinking of these people as if they are sick. Because they are sick. They have a disease of the limbic system, an abundance of fear which causes them to cling to the church and make irrational decisions."

"Can't they be educated out of it?" asked a ring member.

“We’ve considered that,” replied Buchanan, “but it’s a cultural-genetic disease. Early Southern immigrants were predominantly of Anglo-Scottish ancestry, known for their aggression and honor culture, which are features of nomadic-pastoralist-derived cultures in general. Their unique genetic profile predisposes them towards violence and aggression, hence the consistently high rates of military enlistment throughout history, higher crime, not to mention the first civil war.”

“The limbic system is opposed to the forebrain, opposed to reason,” piped up Rauch. “At this point, we ought to say: Enough is enough. Let the more rational culture dominate the less rational one.” He raised his glass. “To an age of reason!”

Some refused to join his toast. John raised his glass tentatively and drank.

“Ah, well, we do live in a democracy,” Rauch said. He set his glass on a nearby table and sauntered downstairs.

John followed him.

“Bill!” he called. Rauch grabbed his overcoat and was about to slip through the front door. He waved John outside.

“Sorry,” said Rauch, shaking John’s hand. “Had to get away from those pacificists.”

John forced a smile.

The courtyard was surrounded by a low stone wall and then a row of parked cars that stretched all the way around. A light drizzle caught the moonlight. The Berkshire countryside, as dark as a body bag, unfolded in the distance.

Rauch continued, “How you doing? It’s been a long time. We should get lunch!”

“Are you familiar with the MIT nanite research?” asked John, cutting to the chase. He showed him the title of the article on his phone. “Are there any clinical trials ongoing?”

“The last one wrapped up six months ago, sorry to say. Wish we’d talked earlier. Metabionic might do another one just to satisfy the Europeans, but it’s up in the air.”

John’s heart sank. Then again, he thought, Nola probably wouldn’t take it anyway.

Rauch’s eyes narrowed. “Who’s the patient? Must be someone special...”

“My daughter,” John admitted.

“I see,” Rauch said gravely. “It’s being touted as a ‘miracle drug,’ even though it isn’t a drug... It’s much more than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your daughter wouldn’t have been selected for the trials anyway. If she has what Pam had. Then again...maybe she would have. The researchers were looking for candidates with specific features...”

“You don’t know someone who could get me a sample?”

“Can’t risk it.”

“Could it be riskier than anything else you did for Pam?”

“John, these nanites, they’re more than just a cure, than intellectual property...they’re the cure for humanity. You’ll see soon enough.” He patted John on the shoulder. “There’s a lot we can do for your girl, you know. New treatments. New modalities. She’ll make it.”

“Okay,” John said, unconvinced.

“Lunch sometime!” Rauch hit a button on his key fob. A Porche came to life and rolled before them. He tossed his jacket onto the passenger seat and clambered inside.

Rauch rolled down the window. “You look depressed! Find someone tonight! Time heals all wounds!”

“Have a good night, Bill,” John said.



## 4

Rauch's taillights faded into the inky night like two points converging but failing to meet on an infinite plane. John went to a nearby raised flowerbed and sat on its thick edge. The drip of rainwater from the copper gutters ticked with the unevenness of a failing heart. The house's rustic brick facade was illuminated by harsh ground lights, filling the grounds with artificial warmth, a rich pastiche that awed as much as it disturbed the senses.

The light drizzle tickled the back of his neck and slicked his hands. Rauch's casual attitude disturbed him. But perhaps he was right. His mind wandered to the past, to Pam, to their arguments, their reconciliations. Her wedding gown, as white as her deathbed linen. He couldn't imagine meeting anyone else like her — it was as if everyone else existed in two dimensions, flat and predictable, playing the same social games, while she had a depth that set her apart. To abandon her was to abandon Nola. He wondered about the world that people like Rauch lived in, a world in which something as precious as love was reduced to biochemical equilibrium, to the elevation of hormones over humanity. No doubt, humans were puppets of the limbic system, as the other doctor would have pointed out, but he wanted to believe in something more when it came to love. Perhaps that desire was where the notion of God came from.

"John Bates?" a man behind him said. It was a voice he barely recognized, one he hadn't heard in over a decade.

He turned to see a hulking figure approaching him, limbs embossed by the crisp edges of a black suit jacket, mechanical fingers dangling from the cuffs with polished metal surfaces that glinted in the light.

"Mike?" said John, scrutinizing his features, baffled by his presence. His face had changed since medical school, from the boyish, naive visage it was to one hardened and cracked like a tanned hide left in the sun. Crow's feet materialized as he smiled. Mike Jones, the one who dropped out after his first year of med school, failure in the eyes of many, an ill-fated romantic to those

close to him, including John. They'd had spent their fair share of time in the underground breweries, with Mike waxing poetically on his favorite topics, namely his disdain for a life spent indoors and on serving a higher purpose. His country. The man's musings were beyond John's status-driven myopia. But, after so many years, a new sort of respect for Mike kindled within him. The man was the road not traveled, the result of an immature conscience whose perturbations bested the agreeable impulse to cling to the ladder of success.

The two shook hands. It felt as if Mike's cold fingers could break his with ease.

John asked about the prosthetics.

Mike smiled. "West Africa. Niger." He regarded John quietly. "We weren't spreading the gospel," he added.

"Oh?" said John. "What were you spreading?"

"Counterterrorism. Total waste of time and tax dollars. Turns out, we've been the terror all along."

"I see," John said. With Nola's situation on his mind, he had no desire to ponder geopolitics.

"The trick is to get blown up in the right place at the right time, by the right people. Then, Uncle Sam will pay for anything. Well, almost anything."

John looked him over. Mike was more than a few inches taller than he remembered. "How bad was it?"

Mike smiled wryly. "VA estimate was 78%. Still got my manhood. Then I retired and got a gig with Xinjiang. Now I'm VP of North American sales. Military division."

"You, an exec?" John remembered him as a carefree student, the kind who spent half as much time studying as anyone else and partied twice as hard.

"Who would've guessed? But I'm getting out." Mike shook his head and changed the topic. "Heard you talking earlier. Never thought you'd be one to get your hands dirty."

"You were listening?" John said, taken aback.

“Couldn’t help it,” replied Mike, pointing to his ear. To John, it looked perfectly normal.

“Things change when you have a family.”

“I see.” Mike scanned their surroundings. “I might be able to help her.”

John straightened. “How so? Can you get the nanites?”

“No, but I can get you the next best thing. I’ll need your help though.”

John hesitated. As far as he was concerned, there was no ‘next best thing,’ but maybe Mike knew something he didn’t. “What is it?”

Mike reached into his jacket. He slipped John a black rectangle. “Keep this close. Call you soon.”

“Why the secrecy?”

“You never know who might be listening,” Mike said with a wink. The servos in his legs purred as he got to his feet. “Gotta go. Cya round, Bates.”

Mike’s heavy footsteps faded. Only the trickle of drainage remained.

John turned the phone over in his hands, unsure of what Mike was really offering. He considered heading home. If Rauch couldn’t help him, it was unlikely that anyone else could. Then again, he’d come a long way just to leave empty-handed. He decided to return to the party if only to solidify his odds of needing a replacement liver.

Most guests were in the dining room, so John grabbed his third drink of the night and began his search there. His eyes flashed back and forth between his list of researchers and the ones before him. He didn’t know what he’d say if he found one of them. He didn’t want to sound like a salesperson, that was for sure, nor did he want to sound desperate.

A gentle hand touched his elbow. “Excuse me, do you have children?” asked an elderly woman. Her husband stood behind her.

John said he did, and was ensnared in conversation with a husband-and-wife couple specializing in pediatrics. They ran a clinic in Hampshire County. A clipboard dangled from the husband’s hand. His spindly fingers were covered in age spots.

“I’ve noticed a downward trend in the age of my patients,” said John, agreeing with their sentiments. He didn’t want to engage for long, but they had caught him off guard. The couple was what he imagined he and Pam would have been like in old age, had she survived. He would have brought her dogoodism in a place like that.

“Many times, these surgeries are fueled by anxiety,” said the husband. “The parents become convinced by overzealous practitioners that organ replacement will be necessary, and of course, they’ve had replacements, so it makes sense to them. It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

John wanted to agree with them. He objected to the board’s recommendations as well. But, he thought of the increased prevalence of carditis he’d seen in his patients. Things were not getting better. It was a complicated issue.

Mimicking his grave tone, the wife chimed in: “And the youth are immersed in suicidal content. We’re not headed in a good direction.”

John cocked his head. “What do you mean?” He didn’t recall seeing such things when Nola was living with him. Then he remembered the boy in the waiting room the other day, fixated on his device.

“There’s a new trend on social media,” she continued, “of young people offing themselves.” She took a deep breath. “Our granddaughter...” Her husband comforted her.

“How can that be legal?” asked John.

“They want it to spread,” the husband said. “It helps insurance companies by skimming off the least desirable policyholders. And it reduces the number of anti-government dissenters.”

John shifted uncomfortably at the mention of the government. Attributions to “They” and “Them” made him feel as if he was about to be sold a product.

“We’re forming a coalition of practitioners to stop the madness,” said the wife, taking the clipboard from her husband. It held a page lined with names and email addresses. A pen materialized in her other hand. “If the courts won’t act, someone has to. We’re gonna sue the bastards.”

It was a just cause, thought John. Nonetheless, he didn't want to wrap himself up in it. They were little people, clawing at a system orders of magnitude more powerful than them. They would never find peace.

Then, he imagined if Nola had killed herself in her youth, as she'd once threatened to do after her mother's passing. He signed the paper, if only to give them a sense of solidarity.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," a woman said. She had been listening in a few steps to his right. He noticed her backless dress as she leaned over a nearby table to add her signature. The black fabric ended in a V pointing to her sacrum, revealing a pale swath of skin stretching from the base of her spine to the nape of her neck. It was quite a revealing outfit for a salesperson, he thought, but they were willing to go to extremes for a sale. Her figure raised no feelings in him. He saw her attire merely as another strategy, another means of gaining an advantage. No woman could compare to Pam's beauty as he remembered it.

The couple thanked them for their time and bid them goodnight.

The woman turned. Her face hinted at either good genes or a good plastic surgeon. Her eyes held either confidence or arrogance as they met his.

"Do you really feel sorry for them?" he asked, sipping his drink.

"What?" she said, taken aback. "Of course I do. Don't you?"

She was at least a decade younger than him, and just as naïve, he thought. "I don't think it matters. Life goes on. Power remains in the grasp of the powerful. Hegemonies are not absolute..." he said, trailing off. It was one of Pam's favorite lines. "But they can get damn close."

He expected her to walk away from his nebulous musing. Instead, she looked at him with renewed interest.

"Well, you know what they say," she said with a shrug. "Cynics are usually right, but optimists are usually successful."

"What could you be optimistic about?"

The corner quartet's strings bellowed as they began an allegretto.

"I'm Sydney Roux," she said, straining to make herself heard over the volume. She set down her wine glass and extended her hand.

“John Bates.” They shook and he waited for her company name to drop. There wasn’t one. Intrigued, he suggested that they find a quieter spot.

They walked until they found themselves in the library, a cube-shaped room with skylights puncturing the pitched roof three stories above. The sides of the cavernous room were clad in bookshelves filled with nondescript volumes, complete with antiquated wooden ladders on brass rollers. A harp’s somber melody played in the background, fingered by a Japanese robot with floating point precision. A few guests reclined on the velvet seats. Sydney led them onward until they came to a side door that opened to a patio overlooking a garden, where the only sound was the distant rustle of leaves in the after-storm breeze.

“Is this okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said as he leaned against the railing. He wondered why she had brought them to such a remote place, or why she was so comfortable with him. He knew where things were leading and it made him uncomfortable. It felt wrong to pursue a woman while Nola’s life hung in the balance. And he didn’t want to betray Pam. One of her last requests, while she was still cognizant, was that he not lose faith in life — that he remarry. To him, it was the first sign that she was delirious.

A long moment of silence passed between them.

“Are you a clinician?” he finally asked.

“Maybe,” she said with a smile. “My patients are rats and mice. Do they count?” she said, laughing awkwardly at her own joke.

“Sure,” he said. He found it cute and assumed she was a veterinarian of some kind, though he knew of no one specializing exclusively in rodents.

“They don’t trust me with anything else,” she said. Her eyes gleamed in the moonlight. “What about you?”

“Cardiac surgeon,” he said. The words always sounded impressive to his ears. They had certainly impressed Pam when he’d stated it as his future specialty.

“Oh, so you like cutting people open?”

“Yeah, I love it,” he said matter-of-factly, as if to scare her.

She giggled. “I can’t say that I’m too familiar with...matters of the heart,” she said bashfully.

John couldn’t help but grin. He enjoyed her silliness. “Really? That surprises me.”

“Why?”

“I pegged you as an expert.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she said, cocking her head.

He took a breath. “It means that I think men find you attractive.”

Her blush radiated in the pale moonlight. “Do you?”

John didn’t answer at first. He felt he’d crossed a line. The breeze chilled him through his sweat-stained shirt. He was afraid of admitting that part of him did.

“I’m seeing symptoms,” he said to remain lighthearted.

She giggled again. “Just finished my postdoc,” she said with a belabored sigh, “Haven’t had time outside of work. But I’m looking forward to...studying this new phenomenon.”

“Postdoc where?”

“MIT. Specialization in nanotechnology. I suppose that makes me...what the CEO say, a life taker?”

John straightened. “Really?” Excitement surged through him. He wanted to say more but was unsure of where to begin. His thoughts about her began to reformulate. He wanted to tell her about his daughter, to ask her about her work, if she thought she could heal Nola. But it would be too much, too fast. He needed to play it safe and see where things went.

“Aren’t you married?” she said, snapping him back to the present.

He groped his ring finger. “She passed four years ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

They stood in silence. John’s heart raced at the prospect of finding Nola’s cure. He looked into Sydney’s eyes — two black holes to another universe. Could he do it all over again? Fall in love and watch another woman die?

She began to pull away from him. “It’s fine if...”

“It’s nothing,” he said, touching her shoulder gently, bringing her back to him. He found the lightness again. “So, tell me, what sorts of terrible things did you do to those poor rodents?”

\* \* \*

The guests at Wu’s house drained like pus, leaving a boil in a sudden gush that tapered off to a slow trickle. John and Sydney had left with the trickle. She had driven over with her advisor, Dr. Rezni, whom John had the brief pleasure of meeting on the way out. He couldn’t believe his fortune. The pair took a pitstop in Amherst on the way back, where she’d done her undergrad. She seemed quite comfortable with him — a little too comfortable by his estimation, but then again, he was a trustworthy doctor and she a bit of a cloistered intellectual.

He slipped his ring into his pocket as they left.

With their masks off in public — a small act of defiance — they walked up the stairs to the W.E.B. Du Bois Center and along the promenade railing. She hugged him closely as if expecting to find the homeless or campus security lurking in the shadows, but as the night went on and none had been spotted, she remained close, talking at length about the uncertainty of her graduate studies. The longer he spent with her, the further Pam’s memory receded in his mind. He felt as if he was a young man again, the future an open road before him.

The “Old Chapel” building loomed in the distance, glittering with religious iconography, but completely secularized by the modern campus. Its windows, long broken in protest, were covered in plastic sheathing.

“People think science is certain,” she explained, “but they don’t know the half of it. An experiment is a lot like pulling the lever on a slot machine. You just don’t know what you’ll get...whether your results will be publishable...”



“But you have hypotheses, you have materials and methods,” he countered. As a clinician, he was familiar with science and used it, but the most he’d ever done as far as publishing was to contribute to and peer review a few case studies involving botched surgeries or unconventional techniques.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean you’ll be successful. It’s publish or perish. A lot perish. Good ones. They end up with jobs at some hole-in-the-wall university or as lackeys in industry.”

“But you haven’t perished.”

“Not yet. But I’m just at the beginning.”

“When I was your age, I’d been operating for a year. Almost started a private practice,” he remarked.

“My age?” she said, feigning offense. “Have you been guessing my age, mister?”

“You’re still young.”

“Some of my female colleagues joke about becoming cat ladies.” She looked at him with alarm. “Or witches.”

“I could see you as a witch,” he said, smirking. “You’ve already got an affinity for rodents.”

“Ew,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “Not that kind of witch.”

“A technological witch?”

“Too sterile. And close to the truth.”

They came to the end of the promenade. She leaned on the railing and peered into the darkness below. He came up behind her and playfully nudged her against the steel bars. She spun around.

“A witch that...steals men’s hearts?” he mused. She looked up at him desirously. They kissed.

“Careful, doctor,” she said, giggling, “or I might need surgery.”

“Oh lord,” he said, laughing.

She yawned, and they decided to resume the long ride home. They chitchatted along the way about different things. She was curious about his upbringing, and he talked about his unremarkable family that was from the

area, about his parents' deaths in the years after Pam's. It had been a difficult time. Her family, on the other hand, was still alive and well, hundreds of miles north of them in Vermont. As they entered the Boston area, John asked her about the nanites.

"We haven't targeted an immunodeficiency of that sort," said Sydney, looking at him with curiosity. "Why are you so interested in my research?"

"I have a patient," he lied, "with a serious pericardial condition. Her family can't afford a replacement." He feared that if he told her the truth, she would think he was using her because that's what he would've thought if their roles were reversed. He didn't want to sound like another selfish professional.

"Oh..." said Sydney. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Could you help?" he asked, looking at her. "I know it's a lot to ask."

She seemed surprised by his request.

"It's fine if you can't," he added.

"No," she said, putting her hand on his. She smiled. "I'll do it. Just one patient."

"Thanks."

"How about a tour of the lab sometime?"

"Can you do it this week?" he asked. "It's kind of urgent."

She agreed. They neared her apartment building in Malden.

"I had a good time, doctor heart surgeon Bates," she said charmingly. "It was nice meeting you."

"It was nice meeting you too."

They kissed once more before she left. He watched as she walked up to her front door. He hoped to see her again.

## 5

After he awoke the next morning, John walked around his Commonwealth Ave. condominium in his underwear, noting all his wife's photographs. College graduation. Protest. Wedding day. Class picture with her first batch of students. Atop Mount Washington. With Nola. With Nola. With Nola. He gathered up all but a handful of the picture frames and stuffed them in an empty bureau drawer. He cleaned up the dust outlines that would serve as evidence of their removal. He didn't want Sydney to see so many reminders of his past. It felt as if she and his wife were two separate worlds, two separate eras that threatened to merge in his mind like a sperm and an egg, creating an abomination.

Then, having prepared for his first shift, he ran about the house for a frantic few minutes, replacing the pictures in the order he'd taken them down.

After his rounds of surgery that day, he set about acquiring Nola's stopgap medication. He created a fake profile in the system and designated the symptoms to produce exactly the outcome Nola needed: Five 1000mg doses of methylprednisolone, an amount just below the threshold of scrutiny.

"Hey," he said, entering Nola's container that evening. Her home was a clean, green box, with insulated walls and a solid floor covered in springy carpet. She lay in bed, staring at the flames within the small wood stove nestled in the corner.

"Hey Dad," she moaned, with none of the animosity of their previous encounter.

He touched her shoulder. "You'd have to go to the hospital to get immunosuppressants. I got you a steroid for the time being. Should ease the swelling." He uncovered her shoulder and swabbed the area before administering the injection.

Kneeling above her and seeing the light of the fire on her face, he was reminded of a specific moment when she was a child — at the start of school when her curiosity about the world was blossoming. One day, late at night,

he'd found her standing on a stool in front of the bathroom mirror, peeling back her eyelid to see the pink flesh behind the fold of skin. Her head rolled on her shoulders as she observed the lacrimal tissue sliding around her eyeball.

He asked her if something was wrong.

"No," she said and continued rolling.

"You'll make yourself dizzy and fall over," he said. He steadied her by the shoulders.

She grew dizzy soon enough. He put her to bed. She asked about the eyeball and how it manages to stay still when the head is rotating.

"I don't know," he said, looking down at her. "The field for that is called 'ophthalmology.'"

"That's a funny name. Did you ever study it?"

He said he hadn't.

"Can you teach me about it?"

She fell asleep that night to him reading an encyclopedia article on ophthalmology.

He removed the syringe from the packaging and retracted the spring-loaded plunger. He yearned for that feeling, of a father witnessing his child's curiosity come to life, her potential unfolding before his very eyes. But, as with all things in life, reality failed to live up to expectations, exceeding them in some ways, and falling short in others. Every child, no matter their condition, was a tragedy in the making. She would always be his little girl despite that person having faded, giving way to the burgeoning woman before him. Old Nola. Little Nola. In his confusion, he saw both. The feeling threatened to bring tears to his eyes.

"Thanks," she said, sitting up. "You seem different."

"Different?" he asked, positioning the syringe.

"Something happened," she said, narrowing her eyes.

"I might have found a long-term solution," he said flatly.

"What solution?" she said skeptically.

"A scientist has agreed to help. She could have the cure."

“Oh-h-h,” she said, “a scientist, huh. What kind of scientist?”

“Look, it’s...” He jabbed her.

“It’s okay, Dad.” She patted him with her other hand. “Maybe she’ll cure us both,” she said with a wink.

He gave her a kiss. “Good night,” he said, wishing that he shared her optimism. Yesterday’s elation had faded. He began to doubt that Sydney would follow through. Perhaps she would come to her senses and realize that the risk of helping him wasn’t worth it. And he wondered if he really wanted Nola to be subjected to experimental technology.

He left the room and headed outside where he found Gus by a fire in a barrel riddled with bullet holes. His fingers drummed on an empty canteen. He looked up when John emerged.

“She gonna be okay?” asked Gus.

John gave him the remaining doses. “Administer them in the evening. Once a day. Don’t forget.” His key fob dangled from his fingers, as he was about to leave.

“Can you get us more of these, doc?”

John crossed his arms. “I had a hard enough time getting those as is,” he said. He didn’t want to become the CIPP’s pharmacy.

“All right,” Gus said. He offered John a drink. John pocketed his keys and took a seat in the camp chair next to his.

“Did you always want to end up in a place like this?” asked John.

“Was gonna be a lawyer,” replied Gus. “Had already passed my exams. Taken the BAR. Was slated to be a public defender. Then I realized that I didn’t like the gamesmanship. The fact that winning was more important than justice. Was probably too blue-collar for it anyway.”

“You could still get back into it,” said John, attempting to appeal to his sensibilities. “Could do advocacy. Help repeal the 28<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Help the people.”

“I am helping the people, just not in that way.” Silence passed between them. “We’re thinking of moving on when this place gets operational. Been

looking at land out west. It's been cheap since the markets crashed. Start a farm. Nola wants alpacas. I'd rather just have cows and horses, but she wants the damned alpacas because they're cute, so we'll have those too."

John didn't think the CIPP would ever become 'fully operational,' but he decided to keep that to himself. "What's wrong with alpacas?" he asked.

"When's the last time you've eaten alpaca? Fur can be useful, but that's about it far as I can tell."

"That's my girl," John said, shaking his head. "Always striving to be different."

Gus agreed. "What about you?" he asked.

"What about what?"

"After we cure Nola. What are you gonna do?"

He didn't have a good answer. Ever since his wife's death, his life had revolved around preventing Nola's. He saved most of what he earned for the eventual bills.

"I'll stay the course," John said as he sipped the swill. Its fruity flavor was growing on him.

"The course?" asked Gus. "Why don't you join us? We could really use a doctor. Then, come out west. The further you get from Washington, the less interference there is. Beautiful homesteads out there. Living off the land. No taxes. No nothing. Turn on, drop out."

John stared into the fire. It sounded good to him, like living on the frontier. If Pam hadn't been so sick, perhaps they would have done the same.

Pam. He missed her more than ever.

\* \* \*

Sydney settled back onto her heels as the elevator to her apartment lurched upward. She undid her mask and rubbed her eyes, tired from a day of data analysis and reviewing the scientific literature for the lab's next publication. It would be at least a year before the article would be ready for publication. By

the time it was out, the results would probably be outdated, having been surpassed by industry. She waited with slumped shoulders as the elevator ticked up to the building's seventh floor. It would be another notch on her CV, but that was nothing to get excited about. No. She was excited about John.

She wondered if his feelings had been genuine. She believed they were, but in the realm of emotion, she acknowledged that she was no more objective than anyone else. Her roommate, Rachel, a slightly older and wiser woman of thirty-five, had cautioned her about his ambivalence. So had her mother. She put their warnings out of her mind. The idea of a relationship addressed something deep within her, the idea of home, which she had abandoned a decade ago in pursuit of abstract science. Back then, she had intended on a career in healthcare. She had convinced herself that grasping institutional levers was the supreme means of effecting change in the world. Now that she was embedded in the scientific institution, she doubted that the pursuit was worth the effort. Science was an endless stream of publications channeled to the ether, each article no more than a bit in the gigatext. It had lost its luster. She wanted something tangible.

Giddiness filled her at the thought of welcoming John into her world. He seemed interested and perceptive, among other things, and concerned about human welfare. That was all she needed to know about him. It was more than she had experienced previously.

"I'm giving him a tour of the lab tomorrow," she told her Rachel, who was fixing dinner. "Then we'll have dinner at his place." Rachel was a PhD candidate in computational social science. They had lived together for the past two years.

"Really?" said Rachel, her eyebrow raised. "You want some of this?" She gestured to the half-casserole on the counter.

"Uh, yeah," said Sydney, setting her things down. She was disappointed by Rachel's response.

Rachel brought out a second plate and deposited a moist cube onto it. She put the dish into the microwave.

She then turned to Sydney with her hand raised. “I think you’re making a mistake.”

Sydney rolled her eyes.

“Hear me out. You’re always looking to solve other people’s problems. That’s your flaw. You get your self-worth from it.”

“Spare me the psychoanalysis.”

“I really think you should go to therapy and talk with someone about it. You have low self-esteem. Anyone can see it from a mile away. That’s why guys keep taking advantage of you.”

“He’s not going to do that,” she said knowing full well that Rachel might be right, but feeling she was wrong.

“Okay...” said Rachel, taking her hot dish out with a toweled hand. “This is going to keep happening until you develop a coping strategy that doesn’t involve work or someone with a penis.”

Sydney put her dinner into the microwave and punched the buttons with her finger. She glanced over at the half-empty bottle of wine on the countertop. She didn’t feel the urge to drink that night.

\* \* \*

The following day, protestors outside the hospital were armed with a new arrangement of signs, displaying slogans such as “healthcare is a human right.” “Wellness for all, not just the wealthy.” The crowd stretched from the hospital grounds several blocks to the middle of South End. They milled about the clearcut greens where their shoes tore up the dewy grass. Above the facemasks, knowing eyes fixated upon his car. Mounted police towered above them, corralling bodies with their horses into the green spaces. Surveillance drones hovered overhead like flies buzzing about a rotting corpse.

John was sympathetic to their cause. He agreed that healthcare was a right. But who defined what a human right was? Food could be a human right, the same with water, but what of happiness? Sanity? Love? Children? Every part



of a good life couldn't reasonably be made into a right, so where was the line? After so many years, he had concluded that there were no rights, and anything considered a "right" had ultimately been won through fighting. Such was the sad state of humanity.

Through his car's cracked window, the scent of incendiaries and capsaicin spilled into the interior. The oppressive odors brought him back to Pennsylvania Ave, to years ago, when Nola was a small creature seated atop his shoulders, and Pam was a force to be reckoned with at his side. He and Pam were in their late twenties. He was out of residency and two years into his cardiothoracic surgery fellowship. Protestors and signs spanned the boulevard, from one line of oaks to the other. His wife bore a sign: *Utilitarianism is Authoritarianism*. Nola waved her placard enthusiastically: *Autonomy is my anatomy!* They had crafted them in a local attic the night before.

Thousands of feet shuffled in a slow procession toward the Capitol Building a half mile ahead. Camouflage uniforms undulated at the edges with helmets poking out of shop windows and over rooflines. Aircraft hovered overhead, blasting the civilians with a downdraft that threatened to carry babies away. Mothers cried out in anger as the machines lofted past. Down the avenue, armored vehicles had congregated in a phalanx. Additional soldiers appeared alongside police in riot gear, clotting the urban artery.

It was intended to be a peaceful protest. At least, that's what posts on social media had said. How naïve he had been, he thought, to think that rights could be won without weapons. Someone had agreed with him. A few cases of Molotov cocktails slipped into the crowd. The families never would have gone had they known. However, in retrospect, the cocktails were probably what was needed, thought John.

Orange fireballs ballooned, followed by thick smoke clouds, as gasoline ignited across metal hulls and nylon uniforms. The soldiers near the vehicles flailed like human matchsticks. Water cans and fire extinguishers were speedily brought to bear, but not before they had perished. Confusion amongst the armed forces erupted as calls rang out to commanders, requesting

permission to open fire. Guns and optics swiveled, attempting to ascertain who had thrown the makeshift bombs.

The order was never heard, apparently. Panicked soldiers either saw more cocktails or imagined them. They fired over the crowd, or at the crowd, either with rubber bullets or real ones; the distinction didn't matter. The powerless people scattered. Fenced in with nowhere to run, they folded back on themselves in a frenzy. The panicked herd trampled to death far more than the military would ever have killed. All John could think of was keeping his family safe as the smoky haze stung his eyes and lungs. He became one of the animals, holding his wife and daughter, stepping on the motionless bodies of the slow and diseased as he guided them to safety. It was natural selection in action.

Pundits on both sides slung criticism. Either the government's response was overcautious, or the protestors were disarrayed and malignant. Regardless of their position, everyone knew that democracy had died a little that day. For his part, John left his ideals with the dead.

He frequented a gym in Lower Roxbury after work. The news on the distant television showed rare footage from the South. A handful of patrons mounted the cardio equipment. From the stair machine, John regarded the screen with detachment.

*"Here's a content warning: Disturbing images ahead. The four naked figures you see hanging there from the Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge in Charleston, South Carolina, are suspected spies, executed by the Southern regime. We do not know the identities of the four men, but the United States denies any involvement. It is unclear how these events will affect the reunification talks later this month, but it seems that the South will not be changing its tune any time soon. Back to you."*

*The other anchor sighed. "Well, that's exactly the kind of behavior you'd expect from a paranoid regime. Fear is their primary instrument. I think the reunification talks will fail, and you know what, I hope they fail."*

*“I agree. You can’t negotiate with maniacs. We used to have a policy against negotiating with terrorists in this country. But the leaders of our generation lack the backbone to do what is necessary to win the war.”*

*“They’re missing a lot of things. Look at what desperation does to a proud people. We don’t have pride in this country anymore. We’ll get it back, but you have to vote, folks. Now, our next story will lower your IQ. Scientists at NASA have put a dog in space on their ‘miniaturized launch system’...but not just any dog...it’s a Stabyhoun...that’s all anyone can talk about...”*

*“Yep. We’re doomed.”*

He replaced the respirator attached to the machine with a cloth mask before descending. Bikes, ellipticals, stair machines, and treadmills, were each equipped with their own air filtration masks. The other gym-goers churned away, deducting point fractions from their insurance with every calorie burned.

His calves ached as he climbed the stairs to the parking garage. Sydney had yet to renege. He thought of what to prepare for their dinner.

A figure appeared atop the narrow stairs.

“Dr. Bates, I need to see your hands.”

John looked up in surprise. He wore a nondescript black jacket and khaki slacks. A generic blue surgical mask covered his mouth. His right hand gripped something in his pocket.

Frozen, John wondered if it was the veteran who had jumped on his car the other day. The man didn’t look like a protestor. Perhaps he was a Fed, after him because of his visits to the CIPP.

“Show me your hands!” he shouted.

John dashed down the stairs to the floor below and into the parking area. He blew past the parked vehicles, keeping an eye out for other assailants while mashing ‘start’ on his key fob. Moments later, the Mercedes rolled around the corner and down the declining floor. He yanked open the door and jumped inside.

“Home!” he instructed.

*“Please fasten your seatbelt.”*

John forced the metal clip into its receptacle. The figure watched from the sidelines as he sped away.

He held his phone up to the gate terminal with hands shaking. The gate lifted. Once his pulse settled, he called the police. Thankfully, there were many nearby due to the protest.

“In Roxbury. Yes, black jacket, crew cut, khaki pants,” he said. He expected another question, but none came. “Hello?” The line was dead.

He tried calling again, but there was only silence. Examining his surroundings, he realized that he was headed in the wrong direction to get to Commonwealth Ave. The car refused his commands and headed west. It pulled onto Park Drive in Brookline and stopped at the park surrounding Back Bay Fens, about a mile and a half from his house. Seeing only dog walkers and the homeless, he got out of the car. A game was in progress at the basketball courts — teenagers blocked and dribbled with masks hugging their jawlines. It felt as if someone was toying with him.

“Dr. Bates,” a man said, approaching him. Golf polo and slacks with businesslike leather shoes. He had a statesman’s appearance and a soldier’s demeanor. “Adam Kauffman.” He flashed a government ID. “Why don’t we chat for a bit.” He motioned to nearby benches.

“What do you want?” asked John, refusing to move.

Kauffman sized him up. He was a couple inches shorter than the doctor. “You’ve become a person of interest. My interest. Now, I can chat with you here, or we can head to a more secure location. Your choice.”

“Am I being detained?”

“Yes, in fact, you are...”

“Then I’d like to speak with my lawyer.”

“...for aiding and abetting a terrorist. As a threat to national security, we can detain you indefinitely, without bail, without trial. Don’t worry, I’m going to be reasonable. If you answer my questions satisfactorily, you may go.”

John opted for the park. Kauffman didn’t scare him, but he knew that he could only push the type so far before he got nasty. He sensed that behind the

agent's self-righteous by-the-book demeanor resided a thug, looking for any excuse to do damage.

"What am I under investigation for?" asked John once they were seated.

"Why is your daughter affiliated with an anti-government cult?"

"She's not a terrorist."

"Not yet anyway." Kauffman smiled. "Start from the beginning. How does the good doctor's girl shack up with a bunch of country chuds?"

He told Kauffman the story in broad strokes. Pam had been a history teacher, an activist. She'd grown up among independent people near the demilitarized zone. A family torn apart by the war had fostered her skepticism of the social contract. As he spoke, he realized that he'd made it seem as if she was the root of Nola's bad decisions.

"The Pennsylvania Ave Massacre," Kauffman said, shaking his head. John was unsure of whether he was being genuine. "That's one helluva introduction to politics. And how did you meet her mother?"

"On a relief mission in Delaware, when I was on summer break in college. After the wildfires of 2077."

Kauffman nodded. "What attracted you to her?"

"I don't see how that's relevant to anything else."

"It is."

"She was kind. Had a strong conscience. Was beautiful. What more can I say?"

"Hmph," Kauffman said. "What about Michael Jones? What do you know about him?"

"Mike?" The focus on Mike caused him to relax. John explained that they'd met in med school long ago. That they'd reconnected recently at the party but hadn't talked since. "He's the terrorist?" He'd left Mike's phone in his jacket pocket that evening, which he'd hung up in his closet at home after taking Sydney home. He hadn't checked it since and wondered if Mike had called him.

“John, look,” Kauffman said, leaning closer to John. “I think you’re a nice guy. But I know that your daughter is dying. I’ve seen people do stupid things out of desperation. And I don’t want you to go there. Whatever he’s promised, or will promise, is not worth it.”

“Do you have kids?”

Kauffman leaned back in his seat. “I have a son. And, no, I wouldn’t betray all the sons serving this country to save him.”

“That’s honorable.”

“Duty and honor are the only things we have, in the end.”

John felt like rolling his eyes. Kauffman hadn’t mentioned Sydney, so either she wasn’t part of the picture or he didn’t know everything, thought John.

“We want you to help us bring Jones in,” said Kauffman, “and in exchange, we’ll assign Bethesda’s best to your daughter’s case.”

“Bethesda’s best?” said John skeptically.

“Walter Reed. Johns Hopkins. The NIH. You name it.” Kauffman’s stare was unwavering. “Do we have a deal?”

## 6

“These are the stress-inducing enclosures,” Sydney explained, running her hand over yet another plexiglass cube. Amongst the hundreds of plastic cages he’d seen thus far that evening, that example had a slanted floor and no ‘mouse houses’ as she’d called them — inverted paper bowls from the dining hall with holes cut in them. The mice sat paralyzed beneath the shadow of her hand. “Not my favorite box,” she said before moving on. “But this testing produced some of our most useful data.”

“How so?” asked John. It was late, and the few others present were immersed in work. As soon as he set eyes on her that night, his doubts evaporated. He enjoyed every minute of the tour, as she went over each minute detail of the lab, discussing the scientific aspects along the way. She was someone with something to say, a rare quality in any day and age. It reminded him of Pam. And he liked the way she looked in her unflattering lab coat. The cloak of professionalism suited her.

“One application of the technology we’ve explored is regulation of the stress response.”

“To what degree?” asked John, intrigued and wanting to fill every moment of silence with questions for her to answer. For the most part, it didn’t matter what she said, so long as she was speaking. He simply enjoyed the sound of her voice. He was also curious to learn about the technology itself. The stress response in mammals involved more pathways than he could remember. Brain circuits. The sympathetic nervous system. Immune and endocrine systems. If the researchers had managed to control such a fundamental biological mechanism, they were much closer to gods than he had expected.

“We inhibit hydroxylation of progesterone in specific cells throughout the body. Now, that does leave open backdoor pathways, meaning that we can only mitigate the production of cortisol acutely. Still, you can imagine how

useful that might be under certain circumstances. We can also supercharge the process in those with Adrenal insufficiency.”

“Wow. What was your contribution?”

Sydney’s smile hinted at pride. “You can destroy the progesterone molecules, replace them with something else, change them in some way, or fill in the active site with something else that inhibits the pathway. Many of those have undesirable side effects, so the best option was to cleave tryptophan’s amine group and use that to fill the substrate. I discovered how to accomplish the inhibition.”

“I’m not surprised,” he said as if he understood. He wasn’t on her level, literally. He was macro biology. She was micro.

“It’s just a big puzzle, with lots of dependencies...” she said as if sensing his consternation.

“Sounds a lot like a diagnosis,” he said wistfully. Much of the medical process had been taken over by algorithms and hidden decision trees. There was little human input, and he rarely spoke to patients. It wasn’t the profession he’d imagined as a young man. All that training, only to become a cog in a machine. If he had to do it all over again, he’d probably have chosen academia. The high salaries still belonged to the clinicians, though. “What do you get for your efforts?” he asked.

“Oh, you know...” she shrugged. “Lead author on a couple of papers. More compelling grants. A second postdoc. Maybe a tenure-track position after that...”

“Two postdocs? Isn’t one enough?”

“Two is better than one if you want to become a professor. It’s a matter of supply and demand.” She drummed her fingers on the cage. “The PI, Dr. Rezni, just took a position at Metabionic. MIT has a P3s with them. The company owns the patent, so she’s going to be the world’s next billionaire.”

“You could be next in line.”



Sydney shook her head. “The nanites themselves are composed of mostly organic molecules and a few metal ions. They’re self-replicating. The only reason they stop working is due to self-termination or host death.”

“Sounds pretty wild,” John remarked.

“The point is that everyone can have them. There’s no technical limitation preventing them from spreading everywhere.”

“Of course,” John said, nodding to himself, “no such thing as a free product.”

“And the first human test subjects were soldiers.”

“Makes sense,” John said.

“But why not use patients with congenital defects? Adrenal syndrome? We’ve discovered so many applications, but only a few so far have been tested.”

John looked down at the sleeping mice in the container. He used to be just as naïve, he thought. The real money was tied up in government contracts, not in the savings accounts of desperate mothers. She hadn’t figured out that finding and drinking from the deepest well wasn’t selling out, it was the smartest move one could make in their world.

She opened the door to a walk-in refrigerator with a key combination. Inside, laboratory materials were organized in separate compartments. The nanite solutions were stored separately in IV bags hanging from hooks — a fluid as clear as saline.

“Seed solutions fail to propagate every so often,” Sydney said, straining to be heard over the refrigeration. “We dump those ones down the drain.”

“Doesn’t seem very secure.”

She shrugged. “They can’t survive long. And only a handful of people in the world know how to program for them. They even use Wi-Fi. As long as they don’t end up in a suitcase bound for Russia or China, no one really cares.”

“Huh,” John said.

She shivered. They left the refrigerated section. Before leaving the MIT campus, she disappeared into her office to change, only to return wearing a simple white blouse and hip-hugging jeans.

As they drove down Commonwealth Ave., she marveled at the multi-story brick facades of the row houses that lined the street. “I used to run down this street. Wondered what it would be like to live here.”

John smiled.

He took Sydney’s coat and hung it up by the door. “Wow,” she said, looking around the room. “What a lovely place.” She ran her hand along the molded edge of a hardwood foyer table, handmade by a Concord carpenter. Pam had picked it out years ago.

He ushered her inside and turned up the music. Vivaldi’s bows lifted the space — Pam’s favorite composer. Once in the kitchen, he broke out a bottle of wine and filled their glasses.

“Hmm, what shall we drink to?” she asked lightly.

“To all the brave mice that have given their lives in the name of science,” he proclaimed. She laughed and they drank. She wandered around the space as he prepared their meal. Cooking for Pam had been a small indulgence, largely due to his schedule. It had been their aphrodisiac when she had been of sound body and mind.

“What was your wife’s name?”

“Pamela,” he said, keeping his voice light.

“Interesting name,” she remarked.

“She was named after an activist actress from around the millennium.”

“Was she an actress?”

“She went the activist route. Taught history at Roxbury High. All the books on the shelf in there are hers.”

Sydney ran her fingers over the volumes. She came across a few titles that raised her eyebrows, namely the multipart series, *How Democracy Failed* and *How Science Failed*. “Is she why you’re a cynic?” The titles continued. *On the*

*Origin of Species. The Twilight of the Idols and the Antichrist. The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.*

“She was an optimist,” replied John.

Sydney spun around. “You’ll have to explain.”

John didn’t want to talk about his wife. “Explain yourself. Why are you an optimist?”

She walked over to the kitchen area and regarded him with challenging eyes. “We’ve accomplished so many things with science,” she said with an air of certainty. “We grew the carrying capacity of our societies with genetic modification. We eliminated pathogens and nullified the effects of bioweapons with vaccines. And we’ve found the means of producing almost limitless energy and solved climate change. Science is ipso facto a net positive for humanity.”

“Ipso facto?” he asked, flipping the slabs of beef, seeing that both sides were well-seared. To John, it sounded like something one would say in a bar trying to win an argument. “You speak of ‘science’ as if it’s a monolith. A religion.” Pam would have argued that no institution was a monolith. All were composed of individuals, with their own values and ways of understanding. The individual was where the revolution would begin. Her words echoed through him as if they were his own thoughts.

“What do you mean? It is a monolith. Ever since the scientific method was established by the Royal Society in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. All scientists believe in progress. Otherwise, there wouldn’t be a point to what we’re doing.”

He shut off the burners and took the salad and carbohydrates out of the fridge. “You could just as easily argue that ‘science’ has created the calamities it seeks to solve.”

“Oh, please. We didn’t create tuberculosis or typhus.”

“No. We created much worse.”

“I said that science was a *net positive*. In the end, science is a tool. Its outcomes reflect the morality of its creators. But I’d say that human beings are mostly good, so ultimately, we’re headed in the right direction.”

“I hope you’re right,” he said with a smile to keep the tension at bay. He loved that she had an opinion, but he didn’t love that it was one he disagreed with.

She helped him set the table. She could afford that opinion, he thought, being isolated in the lab, away from real-life tragedies. It was the kind of naive belief he had held in his youth, that humanity was on the path of progress, with every generation carrying the torch higher and higher, towards the stars, utopia, or absolute fairness and democracy. He no longer saw it that way. Humanity was a figure 8, swirling around the same loci, eternally consuming the residue of its own failures. The only thing one could do as the whole enterprise spiraled into the abyss was to tend to his surroundings and ensure the survival of his or her family.

She complimented his cooking as they ate. The streetlight outside bathed her cheek in its yellow glow.

“What did your wife believe?”

He withheld a sigh. “She believed in the ‘virtue of small revolutions,’” he said. “In shaping young minds. Changing the bedrock of society one atom at a time by showing them the horrors of the past. The only way we evolve our political systems is by creating self-conscious leaders.”

“That’s very noble. Sounds like she found her passion.”

John didn’t elaborate, but in truth, he saw her belief in that sort of progress as a form of delusion. She’d retreated from being an outright revolutionary to a quiet one. The kind of revolutionary that was acceptable to the ruling class. But that false belief in a better future kept her going. She was a wounded animal trapped in an ideological cage. He had become her shelter from the unkind world, her personal palliative care ward.

In Sydney, he saw the same condition. Someone agreeable to the system. Though there were cracks in the foundation, the scales had yet to fall from her eyes. When they eventually fell, she would be left at a fork in the road, forced to embrace a cold version of reality or invent a new fantasy. Delusion or desolation were the options for the average person.

“How old is your daughter?” asked Sydney.

John looked down at his dish. “Twenty.”

“Does she have the same illness that afflicted Pam?”

He debated how much to tell her. His heart quickened. He knew the question was coming, but was unprepared for its arrival.

“It’s okay,” Sydney said. “I was just curious.”

“I wasn’t straight with you.” He set down his fork. “I’m sorry. My daughter is the patient.”

Sydney thought for a moment. “I see.”

He studied her expression. Her face was blank as she considered things.

“Why didn’t you tell me the other night?” she finally asked.

“I was afraid that you’d think I was just after your research. That’s why I was at the party, to find someone connected with the work, someone who could help me.” He braced himself. “But I hadn’t expected to find you.”

She smiled unexpectedly. “I would be honored to help your daughter.”

He stood, and she stood with him. He felt something more than attraction for her, a sense of awe that he had the fortune of meeting a person with whom he had the luxury of being honest. He had only felt that way about one other person in his life.

He embraced her passionately, without reservation. As they kissed, she undid his belt buckle, and they carried on into the upstairs bedroom.

\* \* \*

John awoke to buzzing plastic. He figured it was his phone. A hospital emergency. He slid away from Sydney and found his pants on the floor. His phone was still in its pocket. The screen was black and the device was stone cold. Sydney stirred behind him.

The buzzing was coming from the closet. Mike’s burner phone. He stumbled into the next room before tentatively bringing it to his ear.

*“Jesus fucking Christ buddy, I’ve been calling for the last hour.”*

“Sorry. I was busy,” John whispered.

*“Do you want to meet or not?”*

He glanced through the slit in the doorway at Sydney’s still form. As far as he was concerned, he had the cure. He didn’t need Mike. But Kauffman’s intrusion had piqued his interest. Was the agent after his daughter or after Mike? Perhaps he could find out.

“Yeah,” he finally answered.

*“Walk over to the George Washington statue. Find some shade and wait for the package.”*

The line went dead.

He kicked himself. Maybe Kauffman would know that Mike had called. He assumed the burner phone would prevent any snooping, but he was out of his depth. He put his clothes on quietly so as not to disturb Sydney and slipped out the front door. There were no white surveillance vans or black SUVs parked in either direction down the street.

The park was surrounded by a wrought iron fence. Its gates were always open, but public security drones patrolled regularly searching for squatters. John found the monument — a bronze rendition of the man atop a galloping horse held aloft by a granite pedestal. The statue had been beheaded out of protest, and the words *Liar, Murderer, Thief* had been slathered across the stonework. The man’s hands and feet were lying at the base of the statue.

John felt exposed standing out in the open. He took refuge beneath a tree a hundred yards away.

Minutes later, the whirl of small rotors filled the air. He thought it was a police drone and shrunk behind the tree trunk. Surely, it had spotted him. How would he explain himself to the responding officers?

The whine grew louder as a small tricopter descended. It dropped a foil bag at his feet and took off into the night. Inside there was a note instructing him to put his phone in it and to head to Fiedler Dock along the Charles River esplanade.

Five minutes later, having crossed the pedestrian bridge, he found himself at the aluminum span jutting out into the water. A few boats were parked there: two pleasure craft and a thirty-foot cruiser. John walked further out and spotted a figure on the back deck of the cruiser silhouetted against the lights on the river's opposite bank. A heavy curling bar rotated up and down in the clutches of his metal gauntlets.

"Took you long enough," said Mike, turning to face him. He set the heavy bar on the deck and helped John aboard. They went below deck where the lighting gave John a better look at him. In lieu of forearms, a steel trellis zigzagged to his elbow, masking behind it a sheath covering any manner of wires, servos, and hydraulic lines. His pectorals bulged at sharp angles as if they were armor panels borrowed from a tank. Below the hem of his shorts, his knees were clad in composite caps, a scuffed American flag painted on the left. It seemed to John that the VA's quote of 78% loss was an underestimate. He avoided looking too long out of modesty.

"Comfy," he remarked. Looking elsewhere, he ducked through the door frame. The vessel was essentially a minimalist studio and an engine.

Mike laughed bitterly and got to his feet. "It's all right. Some can't stand the sight of me. Others are curious. It's a new kink."

"I see," John said.

Mike took his bagged phone and put it in another, larger bag and tossed it into a cupboard at the rear. He folded down a seat for John and grabbed him a beer. "Who's the girl?" he asked. John didn't answer at first. "Your girlfriend earlier. Been keeping track of you, buddy. Everyone is watching fuckin' everyone."

John wondered if that meant Kauffman knew of their meeting, but he wasn't about to disclose that to Mike.

"She's an MIT researcher."

"Oh, the nanites," he said, smiling flippantly. "So, you found your Hulda Clark. Investors have enough of a hard-on for them that they'll punch through the market, probably dominate a few niche areas."

“Do you think they’ll work?” asked John.

Mike shrugged. “Only one way to find out. I had ‘em. We all did. Boys were still blowing their brains out. Sometimes, they made the problem worse. Like everything else in big pharma, it just treats the symptoms, never the cause.”

“Earlier you said that there was something better, the ‘next best thing.’ What is it, then?”

“Hang on.” Mike paused and sat up. The boat’s engine whirred to life. John steadied himself against the sudden acceleration. He looked out the porthole, panicked, seeing only the yellow hues of the dock fading aft. “Can’t be time and place predictable,” Mike said with a wink. “The ‘next best thing?’” He tossed John a vial. “If things go south, give her that.”

“Genonixpimab?” said John, reading the label.

“Genonix. A novel biologic. Something that the fat cats at the FDA and the idiots in industry could never dream of.”

“Is it safe? How’d you get it?”

“I’ll give you a hint: You can’t in these parts.”

“The South.” John said. “Why? How?”

Mike shook his head. “I’ve seen things down there that you wouldn’t believe. Children with no disease, the picture of health. Seen their vitals. No tumors, no degeneration. They’re propaganda pieces down there, little celebrities. The North can’t stand ‘em. They’re happy. Healthy. Full of God’s love...”

“Sounds like a miracle,” John mused.

“Maybe they’re right. Maybe we’re being slowly poisoned.”

John laughed. “You believe the conspiracy theories?”

“You believe in modern medicine?”

John didn’t answer. Belief was a strong word. “What did you want from me?”



“I have an implant that needs to be taken out before I can go south, a geo lock. Prevents assets like me from going AWOL. I have the necessary implements. You’d have to go in by hand.”

“Sounds risky,” John remarked. Operating by hand was something they made students do in medical school to ensure they knew the fundamentals. He hadn’t done it in years.

“It’s fine if you can’t do it. I can find another way.” Mike stood. “Let’s go topside.”

He followed Mike up the stairs. They were running dark, in the harbor with the archipelago to their backs. The city lights twinkled against the gently undulating water in an unending waveform. In the distance, the soft music of midnight cruises echoed across the water, drowning out the guests’ decadent din.

Mike took a drink and gazed at the city with reverence in his eyes as if he were looking upon a long-lost lover. “What happened to the mother?” he asked.

“She died four years ago.”

He regarded John with concern. “Was she that girl you were with in med school?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry, man. I really am.”

John felt that he meant it. “It’s fine.”

Mike sighed. “So many good people have died from our stupidity.”

“Whose stupidity?”

“Our country’s. The world’s,” Mike said with a shrug.

“Why are you doing this?” asked John, wanting to understand why he would turn his back on the United States. “What happened over there?”

“Plenty,” said Mike. “Things you wouldn’t believe. Killed a lot of people, if that’s what you’re wondering. Saw a lot of my guys killed. Civilians. Children. You name it.” He straightened. “The question you should be asking is, what happened over here?”

“You were betrayed?”

“I gave them life and limb, but that wasn’t enough. The VA wants to remove all my implants. Shred me up and put me in a wheelchair for the rest of my life. I’m too dangerous, you see. I’ve fought them tooth and nail, but I’m losing the legal battle. You serve this country, you become a line item at the end of someone’s budget. A human life is worth only so much. But it’s not just that...”

“What is it?”

Mike sighed. “When did you realize that the purpose of the medical system was not to help people, but to help doctors help themselves?”

John was taken aback by the question. “I help people,” he said firmly.

“Maybe you are, but others are just delaying the inevitable and making bank doing it. Sure, there are good actors like you. But is the system having a net positive effect? I don’t think so.”

“Is that what happened to you? The military didn’t meet your moral standards?” John thought of it as a different kind of institution.

“We’re evil, John. That’s a fact. We’re the bad guys. I thought I was doing something honorable, compared to going into medicine. Giving my life to protect our nation — God knows we need protection these days. Every step I took closer to the center of power, I was hoping to find something good about it. There was nothing. It was contracts and RFPs all the way down. Extractions and executive interdictions. Rich motherfuckers the world over will gladly take your UN money and use it to water their grass over getting clean drinking water to the people. We don’t care. We fund these bad actors. We’re the bad actors. America hasn’t done one damn good thing in this world, not since World War II. Even then, if the Nazis had won, things wouldn’t be all that different.”

“I don’t believe that,” John said. He lacked Mike’s forcefulness.

“Believe what you want. The proof is in the pudding. The only way to reform our institutions is to burn them to the fucking ground. Medicine. The military. Congress. All of it. Like in a forest. The ashes fertilize new growth.”

“You’d burn the whole system down along with the good people in it?”

“If they had any sense, they’d get out while they still could,” said Mike with a grimace. He looked at John. “You’ll understand, once things get bad enough.”

# 7

John returned home a couple of hours later, at three in the morning, only to find Kauffman sitting in the dark at his dinner table, the cold remains of their dinner before him.

“Busy night,” remarked Kauffman.

John froze in the doorway. “Is Sydney okay?”

“Sleeping. Where’s Mike?”

John swallowed. “I have no idea.”

“Let me remind you of something, then,” he said, uncrossing his legs and sitting upright. “I know where your daughter lives. The Bureau of Land Management, with four other agencies, is about to prosecute the precinct for unpermitted trapping and grazing. This can go one of two ways, Doc. Follow my instructions and she gets the cure she deserves. Or, fuck with me, and I make their lives a living hell. Your call.”

“Why do you need me to bring him in?” asked John. “You can’t catch him, can you?”

Kauffman didn’t answer.

“What was his crime? What’d he do?”

“Three months ago, we found his former commanding officer, Colonel Blackburn, dead in his home. Shot by his service weapon in the shower. Appeared to be self-inflicted. Now, Blackburn was AMC — Army Materiel Command — under investigation for equipment diversion, namely for past-due personal power units that prematurely exited the disposal process. Cross-reference the list of subordinates, remove the deceased, and a few names pop up, but only one of them works for a multinational conglomerate that traffics in military-grade bionics. Would be a coincidence, until we find encrypted messages to buyers south of the Mason-Dixon line.”

“Why would he sell out? He has more than enough money working for Xinjiang.”

Kauffman shrugged. “Desperation. Retribution. Devotion to a cause. He’s off the reservation.” He leaned toward John. “Question is, what does an ex-super soldier want with a surgeon like you?”

John didn’t know who to believe, but he felt he needed to placate Kauffman for the time being. “He needs me to remove his geo lock.”

“Ah,” said Kauffman knowingly. He stood, and then punched John in the stomach, driving the air from his lungs and knocking him onto the nearby couch. “You have 24 hours to make contact.”

“24 hours until what?” wheezed John.

Kauffman’s muted footfalls faded as he walked away.

Sydney entered the room wearing her underwear and shirt. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she stared at him on the couch.

“What’s going on? Did you get called into the hospital?” She knelt beside him as he caught his breath. “Who was that?”

“Forget about helping my daughter,” he gasped. “Things are way worse than I thought.”

“What things?” she asked. “What are you talking about?”

She watched the struggle play across his features. His conflict ran through her.

“My daughter lives at the CIPP. Have you heard of it?”

She said she’d heard some things about it on the news. He gave her the broad strokes of what the eco-village was about. The only thing that bothered her was the presence of guns.

“And then I met this guy at the party, Mike, who’s an ex-soldier with all this military hardware, about six and a half feet tall, and the guy that was just here is after him...”

“Jesus, I think I saw someone like that at the party.” She recalled that scary man watching her from a distance.

“...yeah, and he wants me to remove a device from his body...”

“John, this sounds serious,” she said, putting her pants on.

“Yeah...” John said. He sat up and held his head in his hands. “And I think this Fed is going to go to the CIPP and lock my daughter up.”

“Oh my god.” She was electrified. She felt she would do anything to help him. A small part of her recognized how problematic that was, but her desire to do something overrode all else. “If her condition is as serious as you think it is, then she’ll probably die in prison.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I’ve got some characters in my family up north,” she said, shaking her head. “The prison industrial complex doesn’t treat people well.”

“I don’t think you should get involved. I’m gonna go to the CIPP and get her out of there before things get out of hand.”

“What if she refuses to leave?”

“Then I’ll drag her out kicking and screaming.”

“It doesn’t sound like they’ll let you. We could just head over to the lab and pick up a nanite batch. Then we’ll go to the CIPP, and I’ll have her dosed by dawn. Shouldn’t take more than an hour.”

“Seriously?” John said with a look of appreciation.

“Yep.” She wiped her hands on her pants nervously.

“Thank you.” He hugged her and went to put on a pot of coffee.

\* \* \*

John called Mike several times on the way to the CIPP. He received no response. He wondered if the man was sleeping — if he even needed sleep — or if he was up to something else.

“If your daughter is twenty, and you’re what, in your late thirties...?” said Sydney.

“Are you guessing my age?” he said, feigning the offense she’d expressed earlier. “I’m forty-three.”

“Oh. Still, you had your daughter at, what, twenty-three?” said Sydney, her eyes wide. “That’s unheard of, even in those days.”

“We were optimists,” John said. “Pam was healthy. It was a different time.”

“If you could go back, would you do it all over again?”

“I might.”

They passed through the CIPP outskirts and drove down the long dirt aisle. The morning sun glinted off the solar panels on either side of them

“How can people live like this?” asked Sydney. She stared wide-eyed at the panels and the shipping containers beyond them, spread like a Lego set across the field. She looked to John as if expecting some sort of explanation.

“I know,” he simply said.

“Your daughter chose this?”

“I tried to stop her.”

Gus greeted them at the village center. The silver frame of his pistol, customarily tucked into his waistband, flashed at them like a sheriff's badge. Sydney gave John an uncertain glance. “This way,” Gus said, leading them to his and Nola's house.

John put his arm around Sydney. “If things take a turn for the worse, we can leave anytime.”

She nodded.

They entered Nola's and Gus's container. She was lying in bed, on her side facing the window.

“Hey Dad,” she said weakly, sitting up. Her long hair was strewn about the pillow. She greeted them with tired eyes.

“Nola, this is Dr. Roux. Sydney, this is my daughter,” John said.

Sydney stooped and shook her hand, though she seemed to do so apprehensively as if she was trying to understand how the girl was associated with the third-world conditions beyond the container walls.

“You're a scientist?” said Nola in disbelief.

Sydney began to explain the nature of her work. John motioned for Gus to come with him outside.

“I think you’re in danger,” said John. “I was contacted by a federal agent. They’ve got five agencies involved. They’re gonna do something about this place in the next twenty-four hours.”

“We’ve dealt with the Feds before. We can handle ‘em.”

“Let me take Nola home with me. Keep her out of this.”

Gus put his hands on his hips. “It’s her call as to whether she wants to stay or leave. I’ll back her wishes.”

John rubbed his stubble. “Fine,” he said. They returned to the house.

Having made Sydney a cup of tea, Nola sat back down on the bed. She asked her father if he wanted some. He responded by asking her to leave.

“I’m not going. If the Feds try something, we’re going to need all hands on deck.”

John sighed, dejected. Sydney’s face acknowledged his frustration.

“Your involvement here has put your father in danger,” she said. Her conviction surprised John. “He was visited by someone from the government last night. They are serious.”

Nola scrunched her brow in frustration. “For the past seventeen years, these people have worked day and night to build this place up to what it is. This is my home. If I leave, Gus would come with me, and then the CIPP would be without one of its leaders.” Her hands balled into fists. “We’re standing up to tyranny. My dad did that a long time ago, but he lost the courage to do so. Well, I’m standing up for him. I’m standing up for my mother. We’re standing for the oppressed, and the oppressed stand with us.”

John knelt. “Sweetie, I’m proud of you. I really am. But you need to realize that, sometimes, it’s better to live to fight another day.”

Nola grew emotional. “We’ll live, Dad. We’ll live.”

John left the container. Sydney followed him out.

“Do you still think this is a good idea?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “We came all this way. I’ll do it if you want me to.”

“Okay,” said John. “Let’s do it.”



\* \* \*

At daybreak, the CIPP's lookouts made their way down to the creek at the edge of the territory to check their raccoon traps. Small rocks in the dirt path crunched beneath their worn outsoles. The grass brushed against their calves, soaking the canvas in dew. Black flies buzzed around them.

The elder had his rifle slung over his shoulder. The younger bore their game bag. Yeller the Smeller imbibed the rich odors of the forest as he trundled along before them. The dog's tail, a golden plume amidst a sea of green, flapped happily with his stride.

"What's it like in Chelmsford?" asked the younger brother, referring to the town just outside Carlisle.

The elder laughed. "You wouldn't last a day. There's thieves and murderers around every corner. They'd stick you in a shelter where all the dirty, diseased people are at who can't afford a home or healthcare. And you don't have any money, so no one is going to do what you say."

"Wouldn't the police protect me?" He'd learned about the police the other day. Apparently, they were a separate organization from the Government. Based on what he'd read in his chapter books, they seemed like a nicer bunch.

"Nah. Little boy like you, they'd leave you to the organ thieves. Cut you up and sell you for parts. Feast on the worthless pieces. Like your brain." His brother laughed maniacally.

The boy wondered if his brother was joking. The elder had been to Chelmsford before, with the adults. He must have seen things. A chill ran through him.

The first three traps were empty, and they continued to the road to Cranberry Bog. They passed old, abandoned homes at the edge of the suburbs preceded by weed-infested driveways. Though he'd walked by the dwellings a dozen times, he shuddered to think who, or what might lie in wait within them.

Suddenly, Yeller stopped and picked his head up. His ears were back as he surveyed the area. “What is it, boy?” asked the younger brother. With a bark, Yeller took off from the path and leaped into the grass. “Yeller!” they called and ran after him.

A thud — what sounded like a falling branch — reverberated through the woods. Yeller was silent.

They found him some distance away, lying in the tall grass, a golden mound amidst the green. The younger brother dropped his game bag and ran toward the dog, while the elder unslung his rifle and surveyed the surrounding forest.

Yeller’s breathing was shallow. His bright coat was slickened with blood that flowed from a hole in his ribcage. The young boy was in shock. He fell to his knees and attempted to pick up the dog.

The elder shouted the boy’s name. The boy turned to look back, only to see his brother with his rifle raised in his direction, his slight frame silhouetted against the trees. He fired a shot. The boy dropped to the ground from the deafening report. He looked back moments later, only to see his brother cut down by a hail of silenced gunfire.

He screamed and ran over to his brother. A voice called for him to stop. He didn’t listen. He ran over to his brother and grabbed the weapon.

\* \* \*

Gus helped retrieve the medical gear from John's car as Sydney explained the procedure to Nola. All they had was a multi-parameter monitor, infusion pump, computer, and 4400cc’s of nanite fluid in a cooler they’d picked up from the lab.

Nola’s eyes widened at the equipment. “That’s mom’s, isn’t it?”

John didn’t answer.

“It’s just a precaution,” Sydney reassured her.

John set Mike's vial of Genonix next to the pump — the other precaution. He didn't know if it would help her or hurt her and would give it only as a last resort.

He rolled up Nola's sleeve and cleaned the inside of her elbow with an alcohol swab. She seemed thinner than he remembered. Following protocol, he wrapped a tourniquet around her upper arm to thicken her veins. "Hold still," he muttered, caressing her arm. The skin around the catheter was tugged inward as the steel penetrated her dermis. John stared at that patch of skin. It had been four years since he'd inserted an IV. At last, blood entered the needle. He inserted the catheter and aspirated.

"We're good to go," he said. He grabbed the tube to the solution bag. "Ready?"

Nola closed her eyes. "Yes." Kneeling at her bedside, Gus held her hand.

John opened the valve. Nanite solution flowed into her veins.

Sydney watched the computer screen intently. "Connection established," she said with relief.

They heard a crack in the distance. "Sounded like a shot," Gus said. He pulled the walky-talky from his belt and cycled through the channels. "Ian? Brian?" There wasn't a response. "No one should be on the range this time of day. I'm going to check on them," he said. He kissed Nola before leaving. She watched as he left.

"Christ," muttered John, worried that the worst would come to pass.

"I've got her genome. Cell states. Immunological profile. Treatment dimension one is best for her condition. We can try other approaches in case \_\_\_"

John cut her off. "Do it." The IV bag was a quarter drained.

An air raid siren fired up outside. The wail vibrated the corrugated walls.

"What's going on?" Nola said weakly.

"Keep an eye on her," he told Sydney before heading outside.

The CIPP was in chaos. Mothers and fathers ran this way and that, carrying babies and guiding their children to safety. It seemed everyone was

congregating in the town hall. Men grabbed their rifles and surplus military packs, heading in the opposite direction, toward the lookouts, the barricades. He climbed a ladder onto the roof of Nola's home to get a look at the tree line. Above it, two black dots hung in the distance — he recognized the silhouettes, a quartet of massive rotors flanking bulbous hulls. Military transports providing overwatch.

“John!” Sydney screamed.

He ran back inside to find Nola choking, her face bright red with inflammation.

\* \* \*

Kauffman stood at the crossroads outside CIPP territory, hands resting on his plate carrier as he oversaw the operation. Demolition technicians cleared a landing zone for the birds with bobcats. A row of ambulances had parked along the trees — the emergency medical teams from six local departments on standby. Behind his grim expression, he felt a small amount of pride in orchestrating the activities of so many professionals. He was the guiding light for the force of civilization.

*“We’re seeing unusual EMF in the forest, over,”* said his lead technical operations officer. Kauffman ordered him to continue monitoring. They were likely from an early-warning system, perhaps linked to anti-personnel munitions, he thought. The entry teams had been briefed about the possibility of such traps.

The roar of an incoming vehicle caught his attention. He turned to see the Middlesex County Sheriff speeding toward him, followed by a posse of municipal officers. The SUVs kicked up a cloud of dust as they skidded to a halt before him.

“What is going the hell on here?” said the Sheriff. His puffy gut prevented him from gracefully exiting his vehicle. Spittle flew out from under his mustache as he shouted.

Kauffman smiled. Over the course of his career, he found it difficult not to laugh at angry and powerless people. “Welcome. You were notified of our plans at twenty hundred hours yesterday. Check your inbox?”

“That’s hardly keeping me in the loop!”

“Indeed,” said Kauffman with a sardonic smile. The sheriff was a sympathizer according to the dossier. He would’ve stonewalled the operation, as he had done with others in the past.

The sheriff looked up at the hovering V-300 Polaris transports. The black autocannons stood out against their gray fuselages. “You’re preparing for a massacre.”

“Give these people an inch, and they take a mile,” remarked Kauffman. “The five agencies involved agree, a preponderance of force is the only way to de-escalate the situation. Like swaddling a horse.”

“You’re mad!”

“I suggest you sit this one out, Sheriff.” With that, Kauffman turned his back on the man. A row of armored personnel carriers swerved past the parked police officers and into the overgrown roadside, delivering soldiers and humanoid robots armed with light machine guns. Using the console on his arm, he directed the bots to take up positions within the forest.

Then came the crack, the shot heard round Carlisle.

“Report,” he barked.

The operators stated that they had been fired upon and returned fire. The targets were neutralized. The Sheriff shouted something incomprehensible.

“Proceed,” said Kauffman soberly. If that was the way it was going to be, that was the way it would be.

\* \* \*

“She’s in anaphylactic shock,” John said. Nola’s pulse had skyrocketed. He rummaged through the drawers in the nightstand, searching for steroids or

antihistamines — anything that would alleviate the symptoms. He should have brought some with him. He readied the vial of Genonix as a last resort.

“I don’t understand,” said Sydney, her fingers flitting across the screen and keyboard as she desperately searched for an explanation in the analytics. “Her body is reacting to the nanites. I’ve never seen that not in any human or animal trial. They’re engineered to be immunoevasive.”

“Apparently they aren’t,” John muttered. He found one last methylprednisolone container and inserted it into the infusion pump. It wasn’t optimal — she really needed an inhaled corticosteroid, such as budesonide, but it would buy her a few minutes. “Can you stop it?”

“I’ve put them on standby, but I don’t know if that will stop the reaction.” She grabbed his shoulder, a look of horror on her face. “Oh my god. John, we need to get her to a hospital right away. The longer her body attacks the nanites, the more metal ions will be liberated. Titanium dioxide. They can cross the blood-brain barrier and cause metal poisoning. Neurodegeneration.”

“Need to keep her breathing...” John said. He was focused on Nola. She needed antihistamines. He broke from Sydney’s grasp and ran from the room. He had no idea where the CIPP kept its medical supplies. Distant gunfire parleyed in the background, staccatos of single shots answered by automatic bursts. Rounds cracked overhead and pinged off the sheet metal houses, whizzing like a plague of unseen locusts. John made his way over to the town hall and yanked on the door. It was locked. He slammed his fist against the steel to no avail.

A devilish drumbeat reverberated through the village as the flying cannons spilled their essence on the ground before the barricades. The explosive warheads sundered the earth, thrashing the solar panels with dirt and shrapnel, cracking their surfaces and blowing apart their thin metal supports. Small figures emerged, mere ants on thermal displays, dragging the bodies of their comrades behind cover, leaving hot, bloody trails in the dirt.

A lull in the fight came as the gunfire enjoyed a recess. John ran back to the house and slammed Mike’s biologic into the pump receptacle. “I have to

stop this,” he said, leaving Sydney scared and confused, and Nola in her comatose state.

\* \* \*

“Kauffman!” shouted John at the tree line as he exited the village with his hands raised. He was half down the causeway, surrounded by the twisted and perforated remains of the solar farm. The ceasefire remained. Above the crackle of burning debris, the only other sound was the distant thrum of the aircraft. The air smelled of char and cordite.

Moments passed with the tree line still and silent. John stood with his hands overhead, shaking, afraid for his daughter’s life, Sydney’s, and finally his own. The indomitable Polaris transports hovered placidly above the land with the sun glinting off their matte bodies. Turboprops wailed as they remained suspended in the distance. He wondered if they would blast him. His thoughts went back to Nola. He shouldn’t have left her. Perhaps she had already suffocated. If they destroyed him, so be it.

Then, a few hundred yards from him, down the line of trees, a lone figure emerged, followed by four others. They bounded on foot toward him, weapons raised. The frontman signaled the others to halt and approached John alone.

“You’re full of surprises, Dr. Bates,” remarked Kauffman. He raised his helmet visor with his offhand. His armor vest was decorated with ammunition magazines and a rat’s nest of cables for command and control.

“You said 24 hours!” John cried.

“I did. Clock’s ticking. You can still save her.”

“What’s the point of all this?”

“This? You, of all people, should understand. It was inevitable, John. The forces of anarchy grow in our republic like cancer grows in a healthy body. In the hearts of patriots and tyrants alike. It’s a natural process, and it must be put down or it will consume the nation.”

“These people just want to live on their own terms!”

“We live on each other's terms, according to laws that we agree on, by the consent of the governed. Sovereignty must be earned. Comes at a price. Always has, always will.”

“Goddammit.”

“You know I’m right. Now, can you get those people to come out peacefully? I’d much prefer that to the alternative.”

“I have no idea where Mike is,” John said, his hands clenched. “I never made a deal with him. He won’t answer my calls.”

“What a shame.”

A new buzz pierced the distant thrum of heavy rotors. John looked up to see a familiar sight drifting over the tree line — Mike’s three-legged drone, a mere insect compared to the military aircraft.

Kauffman grasped his push-to-talk. “Come again, over?” He turned to look at the hovering transports. Without warning, a ball of flame erupted from one of the aircraft’s four nacelles, followed by a larger detonation that engulfed its hull, rendering it a smokey husk that plummeted to the ground below. Millions in tax dollars and a half-dozen lives erased in an instant.

The second ship swerved evasively and dumped countermeasures in a fiery bouquet, attempting to dodge the cloud of small, near-invisible fliers that threatened to destroy it. One of the slow-moving drones caught its tail section, causing the rear rotors to fail, and the craft plunged into the forest, trimming trees like a giant lawnmower until it spewed its fuel across the land in an explosive cloud that obliterated everything within its radius and set the surrounding woods ablaze.

Kauffman recovered from his trance. “Where the fuck are those coming from?” he barked. “Phoenix?”

Moments later, a new swarm of drones appeared over the treetops, thick as flies, popping one by one with little puffs of smoke, dropping canisters of cluster munitions that turned the leafy forest into a molten meatgrinder of sparks and shrapnel. Battery packs detonated and gushed their hypergolic fill into the undergrowth. Servos seized, and bullets blasted into the cool blue sky.



Rounds whizzed by John and Kauffman, taking out two of the soldiers in their vicinity. The others spun and returned fire, only to fall shortly thereafter. Kauffman got behind John and grabbed him by the neck, his other arm outstretched before him, holding his sidearm. He was pulled backward, toward the CIPP.

Mike appeared like an apparition, amidst the jungle of wrecked panels, approaching them with rifle raised. His cold eyes stared blankly ahead. The edges of his prosthetic limbs shimmered with the dance of flames in the burning forest.

The hammer on Kauffman's pistol drew back as the agent pulled the trigger. If only John could grab it.

Mike stopped in his tracks and fired a single round. At first, John thought Mike had shot him. He was pulled backward and fell atop Kauffman's body.

"Hey buddy," said Mike, extending his mechanical hand with a grin. John took it.

On his feet, he looked back at Kauffman. Half the man's face was obliterated. From the broken chalice of his cranium, his gray matter emerged as a dull sludge that stained the dry earth. The remaining half of his face twitched and contorted in terror, only to relax moments later with oblivion.

## 8

Rounds snapped around them. Mike's hand found John's back as he guided him to the village. The boom of hunting cartridges resumed as the remaining CIPP militia members covered their retreat. They were chased by the chatter of automatic fire from the rear. A new wave of drones bombarded the tree line, thinner and more sporadic than the first.

"You dosed her with the nanites?" asked Mike once they were behind cover.

"Yeah?" said John, dazed.

"We need to EXFIL ASAP."

"What?" said John.

"Find your daughter!"

John ran back to Nola's house and found it empty. He swore under his breath and took off for the town hall. The heavy door was ajar. Sydney was inside, applying pressure to a fighter's wound.

"You all right?" he asked. She nodded. "Where's Nola?"

"Looking for Gus."

"Where?"

Sydney didn't answer.

John stepped outside. Between the bursts of gunfire came a distant wailing. He ran toward it, finding himself along the back perimeter of the CIPP, near the fuel tanks and battery banks. The crying intensified. He picked up the pace. He rushed past women dragging the bodies of their dead and dying husbands. Some picked up their weapons and rushed into the fray.

"Nola!" John shouted. It couldn't end like this, he thought. He called her name again. Several shots snapped through the brush before him. Unflinching, he dove through a grove of cattails and found her in a clearing stooped over a body. He recognized the checkered flannel.

"Nola, Nola," he repeated as he pulled her off him. Relentless sobs wracked her body. She refused to let go. His pistol, a small patch of polished

silver covered in dirt, lay in his cold, dead hand. “Come on!” She caressed Gus’s cheek one last time before John tore her away from him.

John examined her face. She’d gone from an inflamed red to white shock. Her pulse was through the roof. She was hyperventilating. But she was alive.

They limped back to the town hall. Nola disappeared into another room while John checked on Sydney. He wondered if the soldiers would kill them all.

“We have to go, now,” announced Mike, barging into the room, smoke trailing from the barrel of his battle rifle.

“You walked out there,” Sydney said to John, “like you knew this was going to happen.”

“I swear I didn’t...”

“You’re the guy from the party?” she said to Mike. “You’re a fucking murderer.”

He ignored her. “I’m running low on ammo. I have a vehicle in the bog behind the precinct —”

John interrupted. “*You* knew this was going to happen, didn’t you. You wanted this to happen.”

Mike pointed at him. “You’re goddamn right I knew it would happen. Who didn’t? This place was a powder keg from the start.”

“What do you know about ‘this place’?” said John, eyes narrowed.

“He’s right,” muttered Nola, having returned. “We need to go.”

John looked at her. “Go where?” he asked, but he already knew the answer. “No,” he said, shaking his head.

“Dad, I don’t know what else to do.”

“Goddammit, you’re not taking my daughter South!” he shouted.

Mike laughed cynically. “They already brought the South to her. Come on.” He offered Nola his hand and looked back at John. “If you don’t want to come with, that’s on you.”

Mike ducked through the door. He scanned the exterior before ushering Nola out. She accepted his protection. They left the town hall together.

John sat on a nearby cot. Sydney watched him from a distance. His hands shook.

He wished he could have turned back the clock and made the call to Kauffman. The Feds would have stormed the CIPP, and it would've just been a bad news story, another militant group pacified. Why did it have to be his daughter? Why did it have to be him?

Sydney hugged him. "Go," she said softly.

"Come with me," he pleaded.

She released him and backed away.

"I'll come back," John said, desperate to convey his feelings to her. He got to his feet. "I love you."

Her lips were sealed. She stared at him with empty, if not sad eyes. He wanted to stay, but he'd already made up his mind. He couldn't abandon his daughter. They exchanged a final glance before he headed out.

Outside, he found the Mercedes ablaze. Flames rushed out from the battery pack underneath. He took off on foot, toward the bog, the thin outsoles of his work shoes slipping on the dirt path.

He eventually caught up to them in the forest. Hearing his approach, Mike spun around with his rifle brought to bear.

"Christ. Almost smoked you," he said with a grin.

Nola hugged her father.

They proceeded along the path with Mike in the lead and Nola limping along as fast as she was able. John could only help her so much. Gunfire echoed to their backs.

They came to a turn in the path. Mike held up his hand and then motioned sideways as if to signal them to take cover. Following the soldier's lead, they made their way into the brush.

Mike crept forward to a large pine. Crouching behind it, he held his head low, as if hiding from enemies in the clearing ahead. John saw nothing. Without warning, the tree in front of Mike exploded. The shattered trunk fell with a thud. Mike was buried in the fallen canopy of needles. John clutched

Nola. Cannon shots rang out, followed by a crackle of small arms. Bullets whizzed through the brush around them.

Across the clearing, nine dismounts and a tracked gun platform emerged from defilade. The dismounts moved in to confirm the kill.

A shrieking drone pierced the trees overhead and divebombed the gun platform. The counter UAS gun swiveled but failed to turn fast enough. A plume of fire shot through the top of the turret, a building-sized blowtorch that showered the surrounding woods in molten embers.

The accompanying soldiers scattered, but not before several more drones acquired them. Streaks from the sky blew a quartet to smitheries. In the confusion, Mike emerged from the pine. He cut another pair down with a rapid fusillade from his battle rifle. He dropped the spent mag in the brush and slammed another home with grace and precision. He then pushed the remaining three, sweeping the undergrowth aside with his powerful legs. Two bursts later, one remained. Mike scanned the foliage.

The final soldier popped out from cover and got the drop on him. Mike reeled as armor-piercing rounds caught his upper body. Hydraulic fluid spurted from his shoulder, penetrating his shirt and slicking the brush. His rifle fell with his disabled arm. He dropped. As his knee hit the ground, his other hand had already whipped a pistol up to his eyeline. Mike finished him with just three rounds.

“Come on!” Mike shouted. He holstered his weapon and turned to run, only to stagger as his foot caught on the brush. He seemed to be damaged. John and Nola hurried toward him.

“What’s wrong?” asked John. He’d thought Mike was invincible.

“Move,” he gasped.

With John and Nola supporting him, the trio made their way the rest of the way to the abandoned houses along the bog area. Parked in a driveway, hidden from above by overgrown trees, a nondescript white commercial van was parked. Mike dragged himself behind the wheel. John wondered if they would

make it. He helped his daughter into the passenger seat and crouched on the floor behind them. The rear of the vehicle was stuffed with military equipment.

The van lurched as Mike hit the accelerator.

“Need hemostatic,” he said with heavy breaths. “Green bag, top pocket, tan pouch...” he instructed. John spied an olive drab rucksack in the dim interior. He rifled through the contents as the van was jostled by the unmaintained road. Eventually, he came up with the tan pouch marked with a cross, which unfolded to reveal an array of specialized implements. He removed a preloaded syringe marked ‘CelluStat’ and held it up for Mike to see.

“Neck port,” he said weakly, pointing to his collarbone.

John pulled back his shirt collar, only to see the skin end in a smooth, engineered edge. Nestled between the structural members that resembled the collar bone and clavicle was a small yellow orifice shaped to accept the syringe. John held it in place as he depressed the plunger.

“Need to change vehicles before they...” Mike said weakly, only to slump forward. John finally noticed the pool of blood that had collected on the floor beneath his seat.

“Mike!” Nola shouted. She grabbed the wheel before they careened into the ditch.

John dragged Mike out of the seat and back to the cargo area. The weight of his cybernetic body threatened to crush him. Nola hopped behind the wheel.

“Shit,” John said. There wasn’t an obvious way to check his pulse — he didn’t know if the man even had one. He didn’t think he could do CPR on him. He undid the clasps holding his ammunition carrier and cut open his shirt with a pair of shears. Beneath the fabric was a composite plate in the rough shape of pectorals, studded with bolt heads. The frayed edges of composite fibers scratched John’s skin as he ran his fingers over the impact craters. Fragments of copper jacket glimmered within them.

He removed more cloth and found another yellow port at his obliques — cylindrical with several pinhole openings, likely for data transfer. In the

medical kit, he found what appeared to be a diagnostic device that mated to the same connector. The screen repeatedly flashed the words: *Condition Critical*, followed by an error code.

“No shit,” John said to himself.

“Blood,” mumbled Mike. “...back trunk.”

John crawled over what appeared to be a stack of disassembled loitering munitions to get to a large plastic box ringed with clasps. Several snaps later, he lifted the lid and was confronted by enough ammunition to feed a small army, followed by what appeared to be plastic explosives and other items he didn't recognize. Tucked in the corner was a bunch of soft flasks resembling IV bags, bladders bulging with maroon fluid. The flasks tapered down to triangular receptacles ringed with red plastic.

John looked all over his body for a triangular port and found one in his armpit hidden amongst tendon-like polymer strands attaching his arm. His veins absorbed the fluid.

“*Tachycardia*,” said a small, automated voice. “*Tachycardia*.”

“Is he dying?” asked Nola.

“Fuck,” muttered John.

He grabbed the diagnostic device, which had only three buttons for menu navigation. After what felt like an eternity of button pressing, he found the option to defibrillate.

Mike jolted and inhaled sharply as his heart reset. His eyes fluttered open. “Hey buddy,” John said.

“Vehicle...” said Mike, barely conscious.

“I see one,” said Nola. The road was empty, save for a single oncoming car. “Give me his gun.”

“You're not carjacking anyone,” said John.

“It's us or them. Give me the gun!”

Mike unholstered his weapon and held it to Nola. She reached backward, only for John to snatch it from Mike's fingers.

“Dad? You'll get us killed!”

“Pull them over,” he said flatly.

Nola swerved into the opposite lane, causing the other car to come to a screeching halt. John got out and approached the vehicle — a small hatchback. He wondered if he could pull the trigger if they tried to get away. He wasn't sure that he could.

“I'm only going to ask once,” he said, raising the firearm. The young woman inside held up her hands, wide-eyed at the sight of his bloodstained clothing.

John breathed a sigh of relief when she got out.

They transferred the rucksacks into the hatchback and left the rest of the gear. Mike rolled the van off the road and torched it with an incendiary grenade. They left the woman stranded on the roadside.

Mike reclined across the cramped back seat, a knee pressed to his elbow, his arm holding the blood bag high so gravity drained it. John took the wheel. They headed southwest, for Worcester, to where the north-south railyards were, the longitudinal arteries of trade linking the two east coast halves of the fractured nation. They would board the train and take it south, to the demilitarized zone, which they would cross on foot.

“Couldn't you have done better than this little shitbox?” Mike said, grinning at Nola and John through the rearview mirror.





## **PART 2: THE SOUTH**