

# **The Transhumanist Wager**

by

**Zoltan Istvan**

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**Praise for Zoltan Istvan's writing and work:**

"Congratulations on an excellent story—really well written, concise, and elegant."  
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"Istvan is among the correspondents I value most for his...courage."  
*Senior Editor, The New York Times Syndicate*

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*Headline featuring Zoltan Istvan, San Francisco Chronicle*

## PART I

### Chapter 1

#### *The Three Laws:*

- 1) *A transhumanist must safeguard one's own existence above all else.*
- 2) *A transhumanist must strive to achieve omnipotence as expediently as possible—so long as one's actions do not conflict with the First Law.*
- 3) *A transhumanist must safeguard value in the universe—so long as one's actions do not conflict with the First and Second Laws.*

—Jethro Knights' sailing log / passage to French Polynesia

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Jethro Knights growled.

His life was about to end. A seventy-foot wall of shifting blue with a million tons of water was veering down on him. It was the largest wave of the hurricane—what scientists and sea captains call a rogue. He watched the wave steepen, the wind lines near the lip combing the sky, painting an arch of dark rainbow hues far above his yacht's mast. He calculated how much time he had left before the wave consumed him. Maybe ten seconds, he thought, aghast. His pupils tightened.

Around him, the smoky evening sky was burying the day. Frosty white spray tore off the water and exploded with the force of cannoned sandpaper. The 24-year-old sailor felt its sting all over his naked body. He wore only a yellow safety harness, which was attached to a rope wrapped around a cleat on the mast. It was a last resort to keep him tied to his yacht in case the ocean swept him overboard.

On his face was nine months of Viking-red beard growth. In the soaring wind, it tangled with his salty blond locks. His tall sun-scorched body swung in the motion, hanging between two taut muscular arms. Those arms bore vein-ripped hands, which tightened on the yacht's twisting wire stanchions. The stanchions stretched through the air like violin strings, bound from the swaying steel island underneath him to the towering mast above.

The trough of those mountainous, cobalt-blue swells repeatedly charged and swooned, swallowing his boat, then pushing it out, then swallowing it again. Everything was alive, caught in movement, caught in tension—either growing in power or waiting for demise.

Forty-eight hours before, two Southern Hemisphere storms, an out-of-season tropical depression and a cold front's low-pressure system, collided 500 miles north of New Zealand. They merged into a superstorm. Last night, the hurricane—named *Talupa*, or “wind of death,” in ancient Samoan dialect—graduated from Category 4 to Category 5. Islanders in the South Pacific, from Tahiti to the Solomon Islands, were warned to prepare for the century's worst storm. Winds were forecast to gust over 200 miles per hour.

Jethro's thirty-four-foot steel sloop, *Contender*, was slugging north in the tempest's epicenter. His main and jib sails were reefed to the size of napkins. For the past twelve hours he pushed towards the equator, trying to avoid the hurricane's eye. But the storm grew too large, too quickly. Escape was now impossible. The 1000-mile-wide hurricane caught *Contender* in its left rear quadrant—known to sailors

as the “kill-zone” because it blows stronger than the other quarters; seas were the most chaotic here. Ships of any size and quality rarely survived winds of that speed in the open ocean.

Until now, Jethro's confidence had waned little. He believed his boat was all but indestructible. His yacht was designed with the same ultimate resolution he held for himself in life: survival at any cost. Three years ago, just before graduating from college, Jethro meticulously welded *Contender* together for five months in New York City. He knew every millimeter of the sailing vessel, every point of stress, every calculus and geometric equation used to create it. The boat was painstakingly constructed to withstand the greatest of pressures, in the worst of circumstances, while maintaining the maximum integrity of its purpose.

Earlier that day, Jethro chose not to leave the cabin of *Contender*. He preferred to huddle inside his bunk, tied in by a net, trying to read a text on transhuman philosophy. Inside the boat, cooking pots rudely flung themselves around, books floated in the bilge, and two galley windows were cracked and leaking badly. His batteries had shorted themselves out in the wetness, rendering his electronics useless and the engine impossible to start. Regrettably, Jethro knew he would have to go topside before nightfall to inspect for cracks in the rigging. Safety checks simply had to be done. Many of the hits the ocean delivered that day were staggering. Damage was inevitable.

Complicating his pending task was the bloody pus oozing from his face, impairing his vision, swelling his skin. It was the result of an injury sustained two days ago after a massive wave had broadsided the boat and Jethro raced out to inspect *Contender*. A snapped mast wire swaying in the wind caught the upper left section of his face, slashing it deeply and chipping the cheekbone. He was lucky not to have lost an eye. Hundreds of miles from land, with nothing but a drenched short-circuited radio, there was no one to call, no one to help him. He was alone in the storm, alone in the world.

He downed two codeine tablets for pain and tried stitching the wound himself. The rocking of the boat made it impossible to sew without the risk of jamming the needle into his eye. He considered supergluing the gash shut, but decided it was easier to fasten a large safety pin through the sliced skin to hold it together. The trickle of viscous crimson pus from the exposed flesh was nonstop. The bandages he had put over it were sliding off, refusing to stick. Going outside now would only rip the skin farther apart, making it flap like a sail in raging winds.

Despite it all, at 6 P.M., he forced himself out of bed to do the rigging checks. He stumbled down the gangway, then held on carefully to the galley sink and ladder as he lifted himself topside. Before he went out he hoped for a break in the storm, as often happens at dusk. For the first two minutes, while he cautiously maneuvered around the deck of the boat, it appeared he might get it. Then the ocean's horizon revealed where its energy was feeding—fifty meters away a colossal wave, a seven-story anomaly, was peaking and descending on him. His sloop looked like an infant's toy.

Jethro growled again, his muscles tensing. He was not afraid, just furious. Furious with his luck. With his timing. With his fate. He hated fate. And this moment was exactly why. He could've been anywhere on the ocean, but he was exactly here: the nadir of a sailor's once-in-a-lifetime storm. Damn the dice of the universe, he cursed to himself.

With only seconds left before the cresting mammoth wave struck, he packed his lungs full of oxygen, taking three rapid breaths followed by one deep, slow, final inhalation. Then he bit down on his lips to shut them tight and forced air pressure into his nasal cavity to keep the water out. Lastly, he wrapped his arms and legs like a pretzel around the mast's stanchions, squeezing every muscle he could around everything his body touched.

His final thought before the cascading ocean consumed him was: Is survival possible?

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It was impossible to tell what collided first: the man or the rest of the universe. Everything disappeared under the exploding seventy-foot wave, under the blistering sea, into the crashing storm, into a bursting tempest of various color blues. The mast twitched under impact, then flipped upside down with the boat—the start of a sailor’s death roll.

Jethro Knights held on, violently clutching the yacht’s stanchions with his hands and limbs. Around him, the swarming ocean tugged on his flexing muscles. Underwater and upside down, gravity vanished. Only the rush of water controlled matter now. The moving mass, like a thundering tsunami, tried to unfasten Jethro’s grip. His fingers told his brain they were slipping; his brain told his fingers he was going to bite them off if they failed. They re-tightened.

His will was like the yacht’s stainless steel stanchions, even stronger. His right to life—to always stay alive—was a right unto itself. There was the universe and then there was that right. This was a man whose overriding sense of self screamed to conquer, to bend the universe around his will. The will was stronger than the storm, the sea, the waves—than fate. He looked like a man whose arm must be severed before the grip could abandon its hold. And even then, the hold would still remain, frozen in place for eternity.

It was almost ninety seconds before Jethro Knights’ yacht righted itself and the mast burst into the air, thrust by another large wave slamming the inverted keel back into the ocean. Water raced off the decks, off the boom, off the jib pole, off the solar panels. A bucket, a lifebuoy, and radar housing floated nearby, broken off the boat. Ropes, sails, and bumpers dangled from the hull. The dingy engine, a fuel Jerry can, and a spare anchor, all of which had been tied to the transom, were gone.

The man, however, remained, sucking gargantuan heaps of air into his lungs. The tips of his fingers were bleeding from digging them so hard into the stanchion’s steel. Paint chips were crunched under his toenails from the boat’s deck. The safety pin below his left eye was ripped out. Blood streaked across his face in the wind.

The sailor looked around him and knew the danger was gone. His boat could handle the rest of the storm. He grinned and proceeded quickly with his safety checks. Above him the sky ripened into a vast darkness.

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Even in New York City, still considered the epicenter of human progress and modern civilization, it was rare to have such a publicly anticipated moment as the Transhumanism Town Hall Forum. If the U.S. Government had really wanted to legally address and contain the issues of the controversial transhuman movement, they would have undergone more congressional hearings and engaged the Supreme Court on the matter—but the White House thought a “town hall gathering” would be less abrasive and trouble-free for the nation. In the worsening global recession and countrywide joblessness, the last thing the President of the United States and his Administration needed was more chaos and lower approval ratings.

Days in advance, the town hall forum was meticulously planned in the backrooms of Washington. Senior White House officials, Cabinet members, and senators scripted the media-hyped event to produce both concrete results and a politically safe direction forward. The U.S. President felt the meeting’s careful preparation and its public success were a national necessity. Something truly pacifying had to be accomplished now that pro-religious demonstrations and anti-transhumanism terrorist acts across the country were increasing in response to the mounting radical science movement.

The conflict over transhumanism was straightforward. Futurists, technologists, and scientists touted transhuman fields like cryonics, cloning, artificial intelligence, bionics, stem cell therapy, robotics, and genetic engineering as their moral and evolutionary right—and as crucial future drivers of

the new economy and an advancing cultural mindset in America. Opponents said transhumanism and its immortality mantra were anti-theistic, immoral, not humanitarian, and steeped in blasphemous egoism. They insisted that significantly altering the human condition and people's bodies via science and technology was the devil's work, regardless of how lucrative it might be for the economy. Many opponents said transhumanism was proof the end times was coming. Others labeled it "the world's most dangerous idea."

It was no surprise the town hall venue chosen was Victoria University. Set on the Hudson River in the heart of New York City—and considered one of the finest institutions of higher learning in the world—it was the only American science and educational center whose endowment, upwards of twenty-five billion dollars, was still relatively intact. Other universities had recently found their endowments more than halved in the recent stock market crash, when some of the world's largest banks failed, European countries defaulted, and China's boom economy faltered.

Thirty blocks away, Dr. Preston Langmore looked cautiously out his building's front door, on Canal Street in Manhattan's Lower East Side, before walking outside. He was one of the key "immortality players," as the media liked to call transhumanists, because their principal drive was to reach an unending sentience for themselves. Born to a Mayflower family in Boston, Langmore bore crisp grayish hair and coffee-brown eyes. He was just under six feet, and always dressed smartly and formally. By his mid-thirties, he emerged as a well-respected microbiologist. But his deeper passion lay in applications of science, not its discoveries. Seven years ago, he exploited his extensive social connections to jump to a more practical career. He became President of the World Transhumanist Institute, a nonprofit organization and the largest of its kind—the undisputed leader and go-to network of the life-extension-and-human-enhancement universe. The American-headquartered institute wrapped its arms around the entire transhuman movement, promoting myriad types of research, outreach, and support.

Langmore's job was a powerful position that came with unique problems. Death threats against him had recently tripled, and all the most visible members of the transhuman world were now receiving such threats. After the Faxfield, Illinois bombing—where four scientists were killed, including one of his good friends—no one connected to transhumanism felt safe anymore. But this town hall event was critical; Langmore fought and lobbied for three years to have something like it occur. He walked downstairs and hailed a taxi. A yellow car, driven by an Arabic man wearing sunglasses and a turban, turned sharply and pulled to within a foot of him. He got in slowly, carefully.

"To Sixteenth and Anderson Streets. Victoria University. The back entrance," he said.

The taxi drove off into the traffic, and in nine minutes he was near the massive walled campus, which soared over the city's Upper West Side. Langmore noticed Dr. Nathan Cohen immediately. On the sidewalk stood a man in a brown trench coat, his face half hidden by the latest copy of the *USA Daily Tribune*. There was a worn leather suitcase at his feet. The tall mulatto-skinned man, bone thin, in his early forties, and still a formidable marathon runner, was hard to miss. His black hair was an unmistakable natural Afro, shooting four inches in every direction.

I wish he would cut that hair of his, thought Langmore. The most important scientist for the transhuman movement, perhaps the world—a wanted man by all accounts—and he distinguishes himself with that massive hairdo.

Langmore got out of the taxi and hurried up to Cohen.

"Ready for today?" he asked.

"Morning Preston. I'm ready for *any* day."

They entered campus through the heavily guarded East Gate, walking the long way around Falin Hall to get to the imposing nineteenth-century university rotunda where the town hall forum was being held. Their route gave them ample distance between the thousands of expected protestors, many of whom were there on orders from Reverend Belinas, the rising religious star of the anti-transhumanist opposition. The preacher's advocacy of blatant aggression to anything transhuman was rumored to be

triggering much of the recent terrorism in the country. Langmore was visibly paranoid, checking behind him every fifteen seconds to see if they were being followed. Cohen was unfazed.

“They want to burn us at the stake,” Langmore whispered, when he caught a glimpse of the rowdy masses near the rotunda’s front entrance. Barricaded by dozens of nervous police, an ocean of screaming, faith-touting protesters thrust incendiary posters into the air.

“Well, we *do* want to kill their god.”

“I thought you just wanted to clone it.”

Cohen laughed out loud. Langmore forced a grin. Two minutes later they walked in through the back entrance of the rotunda, where security cleared them to their seats.

## Chapter 2

Zoe Bach was a gracious woman. Half Chinese, half English, she had penetrating green eyes and light olive skin. Her thin black hair danced vibrantly around her petite shoulders when she walked anywhere. Her long fingers and fragile wrists were caricatures of precision, her lips the shape of a young tender fig. Her drawn-out body was narrow and aerodynamic.

Strangely, most people did not consider Zoe beautiful—she challenged too many stereotypical conventions in them for that. Instead, they saw her as an archetype of the exotic: a mix of many worlds, races, cultures. The world’s history beat inside her, its rhythm subtly intoxicating; her every movement breathed that sense. The lingering British accent she possessed furthered the impression. People looked at her and felt slightly bewildered, thrown off by her natural radiance, her unintentional demeanor, and the unspoken nuances of her being. She created the impression that she was lighter than air, a phantom visiting from a foreign planet. When she told them she was an inner-city trauma surgeon, the rabbit hole opened.

As part of her five-year residency program at San Aliza Medical Center in San Francisco, the finest hospital in America, her Calcutta-born Chief of Surgery offered her the opportunity to spend two years in a village called Kundara in Indian Kashmir. The six-decade war, the longest in the world, left millions of people in need of urgent medical care. Some villages near the Line of Control had not seen a doctor in a decade.

“It would be incredible training, Zoe,” said the Chief of Surgery. “You’d be doing a wide range of operations—from cranial bullet removal to delivering babies to landmine blast amputations. Plus, believe it or not, your hours should be a bit easier. You might even find time for some of that poetry reading you complain about missing.”

“So what’s the catch? You look like you’re unsure if you should be suggesting the opportunity to me.”

“I *am* unsure. Even a few months in this kind of war zone is tough for a military-trained surgeon, let alone a civilian one. There’s a lot of needless suffering—and very few medical supplies and staff to do much about it. Then there’s the terrorism, which is often aimed at Westerners. It’s intense, and it can take its toll. But five years ago, I did the same 24-month stretch and loved every minute of it. It was one of the best times of my life. Every day I became a better doctor.”

“I’ll do it,” Zoe agreed impulsively, never the type to back down from a challenge.

When her parents found out, they scolded her. She was an only child. Her parents had put all their energy and resources into raising her. But they never discovered how to subdue her wild, wanderlusting side. Her father, from northern England, remained an unmarried engineer in the Saudi Kingdom for most of his adult life, until at age fifty-one he met his young wife, Kamakita, aged twenty-seven. She was a Mandarin translator for a royal Saudi family. The two travelers fell in love and moved to London. Kamakita gave birth to Zoe, and the family moved to California a decade later. The father continued

working mostly abroad, and Zoe grew heavily influenced by her mother's pervasive Asian spirituality. Especially her deep sense of mysticism, which involves the unity and indestructibility of all life—a classic Eastern concept. Zoe's other passion was reading. Throughout her childhood and high school years she surrounded herself with books, often preferring them over friends. She spent countless hours in libraries, on deserted beaches, at coffee shops, and in her bedroom with her door locked, tackling the classics and reading poetry.

She also adored science fiction and transhuman philosophy. A powerful magnetism toward life extension and human enhancement science had always gripped her. For Zoe, it was obvious that humankind was destined to dramatically transform itself in the future via science; however, her perspective was unlike most transhumanists. She reveled in contradictions that many rational and science-minded people deemed intellectual heresy. Zoe saw paradoxical concepts—shades of gray—as a necessary balance to an often unruly universe full of mystery and surprise. Her deep-seated mysticism welcomed complex crossovers of many different ideas, even sweeping metaphysical theories and formal religious beliefs. She liked to think of her personal philosophy as an all-embracing *transhuman spirituality*.

At age eighteen, Zoe started at prestigious Vantage University in Silicon Valley, double majoring in biology and literature. It was during her junior year that she went to El Salvador and came to view the world differently; that battle lines between Western consumerism and humanitarian duties were drawn. When she came back to the States, she no longer cared for modern-day fashion and materialism, such as makeup, handbags, or showy high heels. She was *never* big on it. But now, after seeing so much poverty—made worse by Hurricane Fitch's direct path of La Libertad, which ravaged the hospital she volunteered at—she was through with it. Colleagues came to call her “the tennis shoe woman” because she refused to wear anything else on her feet.

“If you don't like my ass and legs because I don't perk them up with heels and pretend they're sexier than they really are, then go to hell,” Zoe once told a date, smiling carelessly. “And the same goes for my small breasts and the push-up bras I refuse to wear.”

Another date, an orthopedic surgeon, once asked her why she didn't wear any mascara or lipstick. “For the same reason you don't,” she shot back.

It was a good answer, he thought, not sure what would ever compel him to stand in front of a mirror and color his face.

El Salvador planted other ideas in Zoe Bach. In a Third World country where medical supplies are scant, nearly every surgery is trauma to some extent. She thrived on the intensity. Additionally, the field of trauma surgery didn't have many women in it. How insane, she thought, determined to change that. She spent much of the next year traveling during her senior year school breaks: Bolivia, Yemen, Zambia; she volunteered at hospitals' trauma wards.

The following fall, she started medical school in New York City at Victoria University. In the beginning it was lunacy: Could she really remember 90,000 five-syllable medical words by the end of four years? She did. But that challenge was nothing compared to her surgery residency schedule at San Aliza Medical Center. Her first two years were spent in a drowsy daze—on call, in the operating ward, half-asleep while standing against a wall, before she was paged for another emergency. Then, running down the hall to meet another incoming ambulance, her stethoscope dancing the rumba around her neck. Everything from industrial accidents to motorcycle crashes to gunshot wounds. Zoe took it all on. Her beeper was the most constant companion in her life, its sharp beep the sound of nightmares. Rarely was any work week under 110 hours. She was one of only three surgeons in the busy residency program who could claim they never fell asleep during a surgery—and was nudged awake by a nurse with furrowed eyebrows.

“But twice I've fallen asleep in the hospital bathroom, peeing,” she admitted to people.

Her residency program worked her to exhaustion. Then one morning, after pulling a graveyard shift, she walked out of the hospital in her dirty scrubs. The blaring California sun was almost too

bright for her. She went home, changed, and packed her backpack. On the way to the airport, in a taxi, she gulped down an anti-malaria tablet. Two hours later she boarded a plane to Indian Kashmir.

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Two months before the Transhumanism Town Hall Forum, working amidst the ice and snow caking upper Manhattan, Jethro Knights welded a 100-pound rectangular piece of steel plating to *Contender*'s hull. He was in a boatyard along the Hudson River. His right hand expertly bore the steady red-hued fire while his left hand fed the molten rod. Jethro's aged and gritty goggles—like so many of his tools—came from a pawnshop, bought with money he had earned from part-time construction jobs on nearby skyscrapers. Unshaven, he worked through the freezing early spring nights, downing caffeine pills, and welding endless plates together, syncing a metal skeleton that would one day face off with hurricanes and take him around the globe.

The boatyard manager—a veteran seaman—was certain that Jethro would never finish when he rented the yard space earlier that autumn and had six thousand dollars worth of rusty recycled steel dumped off. The manager wasn't the only skeptic. Everyone, from boatyard grunts with crooked teeth, to mega-yacht owners wearing thousand-dollar shoes, stopped by to watch Jethro work. Most sneered at his hand-scribed structural drawings tacked on a rickety desk under his space's huge blue tarp. They snickered while he worked—some telling him the boat would not sail, others that it wouldn't even float.

Jethro, however, rarely listened to people. Or noticed them at all. Even if he looked a person directly in the eye, he often failed to recognize anything of utility. Jethro perceived their presence, the space they took up, the resources they used on his planet. His brain interpreted the matter and energy they possessed, but unless there was potential for something useful to him, he may as well have been looking at a rock, or a weed, or a broken, outmoded piece of furniture in a junkyard. Jethro only took notice of values, not people.

Most others quickly recognized this—and despised him for it. It was instinctive for them. Few people wanted to be judged solely on their usefulness and then be dismissed because they possessed little or none. They felt immediate enmity and resistance to that type of harsh machinelike objectivity. A person who viewed the world like that, they sneered, was neither compassionate nor very human. Of course, Jethro rarely considered this either—and certainly didn't care. It wasn't that he was cold, or even aloof. It was his distinct manner of not making the effort to care about people with little or no value.

Many years ago—he wasn't sure when it happened, or if it even happened at all, or if he was just always this way—Jethro realized he was fundamentally alone in the universe. Even if billions of people and their cultures and moral aptitudes were critically judging, pressuring, and expecting something of him, his demeanor remained totally unaffected. It wasn't that he didn't want to have friends, or like and even care about other people, it was just that he rarely met any person who made him feel like he thought he should.

Besides, Jethro knew his boat would sail—and sail well. He studied the best nautical engineering designs in the world before building. He spent four weeks at the North Atlantic Yachting Library poring over the most comprehensive boat construction manuals. He spent a long weekend combing over the America's Cup website and its detailed diagrams of past champion racing yachts. He even bought beers for an old fishing captain who explained what it took to survive a Category 4 hurricane off Rhode Island aboard his dated forty-foot crabbing vessel. Jethro scribed notes of everything important into his journal, methodically devising the ideal sailboat, determining what materials were most suitable, and assessing possible budget issues. When he was ready he proceeded, like an expert, to build the

strongest, fastest, most able boat he could.

Jethro's construction during the past three months was intense—eighteen-hour days. Occasionally he would interrupt his work on the boat, jump on his bike, and peddle for thirty minutes to class at Victoria University, sometimes through snow. He was a senior, so school was less demanding and required only small amounts of his time.

To gain practical bluewater experience, each Sunday morning Jethro practiced sailing—first by renting dinghies, then twelve-foot Lasers, then J-21s; finally, he only practiced on a thirty-five-foot Swensen sloop, a boat comparable in weight and size to his own creation. He rented it from someone at the prestigious Fillmore Yacht Club, down the road from his boatyard. It was amongst these posh boats at Fillmore, when Jethro was almost finished building *Contender*, that Gregory Michaelson saw him—and stood astonished, staring crudely, as if looking at an accident with mangled bodies strewn on the asphalt. They were classmates in the philosophy department at Victoria University, where Gregory was taking his degree in preparation to pursue law and, eventually, politics.

Gregory was dressed in a tight aqua-blue polo shirt, white linen pants, and Italian shoes. His eyes were dark brown, but his skin was fair and silky. His short, chestnut-colored hair was carefully brushed, parted, and gelled. His underwear carried an unpronounceable French brand name on the back of it. He wore a diamond-studded gold watch, which dangled loosely, carelessly on his wrist; a reflection of it often bounced off his mirrored silver sunglasses. Tall, elegant, and bearing a pointy chin, he appeared a preppy, aristocratic figure.

In the late 1960s, Gregory's father, an eminent attorney-turned-senator in New York, married a graceful woman from a powerful English family, assuring his namesake a tie to both the European and American social registries. Three years later, the couple conceived Gregory. As an only child, the boy was pampered from infancy up, his every need being catered to by a live-in nanny, private tutors, and personal sports trainers. The world revolved around him, Gregory remembered thinking as a young teenager. It was true, as long as it was others who did the revolving. Without the others, though, Gregory didn't know what to think.

At age twenty-one, Gregory proved himself a rising star in college—the popular man on campus whom everyone tried to befriend. He was also one of the most accomplished in his class at Victoria University: a decorated track athlete with a penchant for competition; a devoted member of the Alpha Phi Fraternity; a volunteer children's mentor at his Christian church; a dabbling violinist; an able wingman for his friends when they went to clubs looking for ladies; a connoisseur of fine foods. He once distinguished twenty-six different cheeses blindfolded in a fancy restaurant, winning a contest against peers from another private college. Modishness, flair, and class were in Gregory's every thought and decision—aesthetics before function, pomp before action, style before reason. He epitomized the youthful, modern-day gentleman playboy, with a dash of metrosexuality for good measure.

Many people who met Gregory for the first time—seeing his bright smile, shaking his firm hand, and hearing him speak eloquently—took for granted that a great American future awaited him. Maybe he would become a powerful CEO. Or a foreign diplomat. Or a politician like his father. Maybe even become President of the United States, they imagined. If anyone possessed that Camelot-type feel, it was eye-catching Gregory.

In contrast to Gregory's sleek sailing attire, Jethro Knights wore paint-stained jeans, a torn black T-shirt, and old tennis shoes. There was nothing shiny about him. He didn't wear sunglasses, a watch, or even underwear. Dirt was pressed underneath his fingernails, and leathery calluses were visible all over his hands.

He was kneeling down on the concrete dock, unfolding a spinnaker sail, and concentrating on the sewn pattern of its seams, when Gregory walked up to him from behind and tapped him on the back.

"Jethro Knights—it really is you?" he asked. "What are you doing here?"

Jethro looked up, staring hard at Gregory, trying to remember who he was. Jethro disliked others interrupting him, and he especially disliked others touching him uninvited.

“I’m preparing to go sailing, Greg.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you were a member here?”

“I’m *not* a member here.”

Gregory was sure he meant, *I’d never be a member—here*, by the tone of his voice.

“I’m just renting a boat here to learn how to sail,” Jethro explained.

“Oh, that’s right. Someone told me you were building one at the yard down the road. To go around the world or something after graduation. Is that true?”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

“Where did you learn to build a bluewater sailboat?”

“From books and websites.”

Gregory snickered, looking worse than skeptical. “Books? The Internet? Are you kidding me? Do you think you’ll make it? All the way around—and survive?”

“I imagine so, if I’m doing it.”

“What about hurricanes? Pirates? And the hundreds of other dangers?”

Jethro looked at Gregory. Looked right through him. Jethro was tired from welding until 2:30 A.M. the night before. And now he was already tired of talking to this man in front of him.

“I’ll overcome them,” he said, and turned back to examine the sail on the ground. He was finished with the conversation.

Gregory frowned—his pride stung. He stood foolishly above Jethro, watching his back. Being a senator’s son, a star athlete, and one of the most popular men on campus had never made any impact on Jethro. They’d met a dozen times before in classes and seminars, and Gregory still couldn’t get him to have a simple, amicable sixty-second conversation. He shook his head, thinking Jethro was a rude, conceited peasant.

“Well, in case you’re free,” Gregory blurted out, aiming to taunt him, “I’m captaining my dad’s *Blue Lagoon* today in a local race.”

*Blue Lagoon* was a magnificent, ninety-two-foot, 1929 wooden schooner that often graced New York City’s harbors. Senator Michaelson’s father bought it and sailed it from Hawaii, after it had served in World War II in the Pacific. Now the historical ship, meticulously maintained, was in all the prestigious East Coast yacht races and regattas. It also served as a magnet for famous figures and important private occasions in New York City. Sometimes the U.S. President quietly spent an afternoon on it discussing issues with Gregory’s father and the leading bankers of Wall Street. Other times, influential ministers like Reverend Belinas, married powerful diplomats, and business tycoons appeared on its foredeck in small, exclusive ceremonies. Occasionally, even Hollywood actors or rock stars borrowed it for their wild birthday bashes.

“Half my crew is apparently hungover from that huge Greek party last night,” Gregory said. “Were you there? Just off Seventeenth Street near campus? It was a crazy rager—one of the year’s best.”

Gregory knew Jethro didn’t go to parties. He also knew Jethro would never be invited. “I think most of my crew is a no-show. You interested to join and sail with us? *Blue Lagoon* could always use a gorilla on board.”

Gregory watched Jethro carefully, waiting for a reaction, almost hoping for one. He knew the question was loaded. The nautical term “gorilla” was derogatory—a name for a mindless crew member who shifted from one side of the boat to the other to give weight advantage on tacks. Generally, a gorilla wasn’t allowed to do anything else on board due to a lack of sailing skills. Many sailors considered the word a slap in the face. And Gregory felt confrontational today, dishing it out. At 6 feet 4 inches, he was taller and heavier than Jethro, and counted on his longer reach if there was a fight. Plus, his friends and personal security were in the clubhouse behind them, surely keeping watch and ready to jump in.

## Chapter 3

Usually, Gregory Michaelson exercised caution with Jethro Knights. Everyone at Victoria University who knew him did. The pool cue incident was too well known not to do so. Teachers and students, especially those in the philosophy department, were warned to keep guard against Jethro and to report anything out of the ordinary. To understand that he was a student capable of anything.

Jethro's notoriety began with an assault-and-battery investigation in the second half of his sophomore year. A stocky, arrogant linebacker from the football team, drunk from a night of partying, wandered alone into the main dormitory game room on campus and interrupted Jethro's billiards game. The linebacker, a senior, picked up the black eight-ball, with half of the other balls still on the table, rudely declaring, "I'm next. This game is over."

The freshman playing Jethro immediately cowered, saying, "Sure, go ahead, man."

Holding a pool stick in his right hand, Jethro stared incredulously at the linebacker. The senior smiled mockingly back at him, and said, "Guess I'm playing you, huh? Don't look so grumpy about it, blondie."

The linebacker began racking balls in the triangle. He did not notice Jethro's eyes turning icy.

Instead of starting a new game, Jethro walked over to the senior, adjusted the pool stick in his hands—so that he was gripping it like a baseball bat—and swung. The tip of the cue broke directly over the football player's nose. The student stumbled, then dropped down to the ground, unconscious. From his face a puddle of blood quickly appeared on the terracotta floor tiles.

The freshman, the only other person in the game room, stared in disbelief.

"Oh my God. Oh fuck," he whispered in horror.

"Want to finish the game?" Jethro calmly asked the kid.

The freshman didn't answer. His stare was frozen on the fallen student and the blood gushing from his nose. Then the kid abruptly sprinted out of the dormitory. Jethro shrugged, grabbed a spare cue, and sunk the burgundy seven-ball. He walked upstairs to his room to begin his night of studying.

Twenty minutes later, numerous police cars and an ambulance were in front of the dormitory after a 911 call was made. Dozens of students watched the paramedics rush the linebacker out of the building, a trail of blood falling from the stretcher onto the century-old stone walkway.

Seventy-two hours later, nearly everyone on campus knew some version of the story. Despite this, the dean and the police couldn't fully prove Jethro did it. Even though he was spotted at the scene of the crime, and his prints were all over the broken pool cue, the football player chose to remain silent about his assailant. Nursing a badly broken nose in a hospital room for four days, the linebacker had transformed into a deeply humbled and embarrassed man, wishing only that the incident would soon be forgotten. The only other witness, the freshman, also wanted to forget that night. He kept out of it entirely by denying to authorities that he had seen anything.

Given the circumstances, the dean was reluctant to expel Jethro Knights—or any student. This was Victoria University, the 250-year-old institution older than the country itself, and the stepping stone of a lifetime for anyone who passed through its storied halls. Over 100 Nobel laureates and ten American presidents had matriculated there. It was rumored that Babek Hall still leaked radiation from its basement, where the first atom was split in front of Einstein's careful watch. To expel any students from Victoria was to end their burgeoning futures.

Besides, Jethro's case was complicated. He had not been admitted to the institution because of his extracurricular activities or scholastic excellence. He had mostly F or A grades through junior high and high school—either a genius or an idiot, one admissions officer grumbled. A high school counselor echoed something similar: The guy who throws curves out of whack or finishes last—or not at all. Jethro's aptitude tests were filled with Scantron pencil marks bearing anarchist symbols, upside-down crosses, and his favorite math symbol: *pi*. No, Jethro's grades and test scores did not get him into

Victoria. He was admitted for his entrance essay—some of the most intense and impressive words the dean had ever read.

Dean Graybury was new on the job. He was a recent executive hire from one of Silicon Valley's leading technology companies. He was brought on to fulfill the promise that he would bring the country's brightest innovators through the university's doors. To do so, his newest admissions initiative was to look for outliers, that one-in-a-million student who may not play by the rules, because he's able to write better ones—or at least more interesting ones. For the past twenty years, many of the top students at Victoria were simply boring, coming from old, complacent, pedigree-bearing families. The dean, a closet transhumanist, wanted new ideas, new blood, new directions. He wanted the university to think like a tech startup when admitting students, hungry for market dominance and a booming future. Perfect grades, high test scores, and typical extracurricular ideas were not enough anymore, he insisted. Students were needed who could think outside the box, be vivaciously creative, and shape a new world. Humankind was evolving so quickly with advancements in technology, the dean strategized, that new talent was required to steer it correctly and safely.

Jethro Knights was an ideal candidate.

Besides, the dean thought, the assaulted football player was a known meathead with a history of bullying people in his classes and fraternity. And the dean disliked both the Greek system and football.

Watching students on the campus lawn through his corny Gothic office window, Dean Graybury sighed. He was unsure of what to do. The chancellor of the university had insisted he expel Jethro. But the dean liked the young man, or what little he knew about him. He thought of Jethro's shadowy past: an only child, whose Swedish mother and Austrian father disappeared as European diplomats in Iran when he was just six years old. Religious extremists were rumored to be responsible. Jethro's father was publicly critical of the Koran—or any religious text—as a tool to govern society. Lamentably, neither Jethro's parents nor their remains ever surfaced, and the truth behind their disappearance was never discovered. The boy was sent to Los Angeles and raised there, partly by an old aloof uncle, partly by foster homes after the uncle had died. There didn't appear to be any rogue childhood issues—no hindrances, no criminal record, no major academic or disciplinary issues. On his college application, his extracurricular skills simply stated: transhuman philosopher.

For the nearly 50,000 students applying to Victoria University's 2,500 admission spots, it was unremarkable. But the essay Jethro wrote with his application was like nothing the dean thought possible from a teenager. It was more a declaration than an essay. It was a damning critique of the widespread fear of designer evolution. Evocative, compelling, and eloquent, it tore apart religious dogma and blasted traditionalism. It concluded by promoting outright aggression towards opponents. You took a critical chance writing about that to such a school—as conservative as it was—and not about your merit scholarships, or national piano championships, or the state track records you broke. Yet the dean wished he had written that essay when he was only seventeen years old—and maybe even now. He accepted Jethro to the school, overruling a unanimous veto by the stuffy admissions staff.

But now this: a broken pool stick on a football player's head. The dean smiled. He secretly wished he had done that, too, when he attended Victoria twenty-five years ago and was ridiculed as a skinny computer science geek. Guess Jethro meant what he said in the essay, the dean thought.

Unwilling to follow the expulsion recommendation of the university chancellor, the dean called Jethro into his office with a plan. He told the young man to take a semester off, and offered him a coveted job as an assistant to a good friend: Francisco Dante, a spirited and renowned journalist for the award-winning weekly, *International Geographic*; it was one of the few remaining media sources the dean enjoyed anymore. All others, like the popular *USA Daily Tribune* newspaper, or the ubiquitous and glitzy International Media Network (IMN) television channel, were heavily commercialized, superficial, and annoyingly conservative.

Dante, a hulking Spaniard and longtime transhuman advocate, was currently covering the Congo war in Africa. His assistant had been shot and killed last month. Dean Graybury warned Jethro the

experience would be heavy and grueling, but ultimately eye-opening and transformative. Furthermore, the dean promised Jethro he would pull strings to get him back into Victoria when the fall semester came around, assuming he agreed to stay away from pool cues.

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Jethro Knights welcomed the adventure of going to the Congo for *International Geographic*. A few weeks after he arrived in Central Africa, Francisco Dante wrote the dean from their jungle camp:

*Where did you find this guy? He's the perfect assistant—engaged, intelligent, efficient, and super low-maintenance. If only he doesn't leave me to join the revolution. I've rarely met someone so impenetrable, so lacking in fear.*

Jethro did his job for the reporter, learning the journalism trade along the way. They became friends and carefully looked out for each other, often discussing transhumanist concerns late into the night around a campfire. There was little to do in the jungles of the Congo except to follow the military around, avoid snake bites, and stay out of the way of bullets and shelling from guerrilla fighters. They lived mostly on remote trails in rainforests, or on the backs of army trucks, waiting for that perfect moment to snap a photograph or conduct an important interview. Occasionally, they would find themselves amongst a plethora of limbless and headless bodies, consoling a weeping chief whose village had just been ransacked by a looting warlord and his militia.

Jethro's declared major of philosophy in college offered consolation to what he had witnessed in the Congo. Jethro chose this major because, besides giving mental strength through the use of reason and logic, philosophy was the one subject that united all others. It bridged gaps between various pieces of knowledge, while also instructing how to find the pieces that weren't yet discovered—the most interesting ones. Jethro was born in love with the unknown. A propensity to ask, *Why?* Philosophy gave the explorer direction when no map was available.

Beginning with childhood, Jethro was attracted to transhuman philosophy. This was because he instinctively viewed life as a chance to improve himself, hoping one day he might reach a self-actualized perfection. He knew that much was obvious for any advanced thinking entity living in an evolutionary universe. He spent much of his youth considering ideas around his personal development: reading nonfiction science books, following sci-fi cinema, forming futurist thoughts, and keeping a detailed journal about how to be his best self. His budding transhuman perspective spanned seasons and years, evolving, maturing, and finally snowballing all the way into his first semester at college.

At Victoria, he formally immersed himself in the academics of transhuman thought, rigorously considering and debating its every philosophical idea and direction. Despite this, his mindset—though habitually brash and brave—remained quite scholarly and intangible. He possessed little concrete experience in transhuman dealings, little real-world street time—just idealistic thoughts and feelings of what he hoped to do in life and what he hoped to become. His future was still uncertain.

All of that changed three months into his Congo trip, when the map of his destiny was infallibly carved into his psyche, accompanied by a tsunami of urgency.

Alone in the jungle during a late afternoon, while he was collecting firewood for a night out on watch, he strayed fifteen meters off the dirt path. In the distance was a choice dry log wedged deep in the grass, and dry wood in the damp rainforest was hard to find. He instantly went for it, ditching the cardinal rule of the Congo: Never leave the path. Without warning, he stepped on a barely buried metal object, creating a sharp noise underneath him. The sound was unmistakable; it was a sudden and loud *click*. Panic struck him. He knew immediately what it was. The forest was full of them: landmines.

Jethro waited for the explosion, intuitively bracing himself for impact, snapping his teeth together, shutting his eyes. He waited for his legs and torso to be ripped apart, waited for mutilation and death. His arm hairs spiked, his muscles flexed, his fists clenched.

The blast never came.

Jethro was shocked. He didn't dare move. The seconds were precious. Finally, he jumped back and sprinted to the path, turning around to scrutinize where he had just stood. In the ground, he could barely make out the corner of a buried metallic disc. It was a dud.

For Jethro, however, it was a philosophical nuke. A single moment that transformed his youthful transhuman outlook into a physical law of its own—like the sweat on his brow in the equatorial sun, or the pressure in his hand when he made a fist. He was forever a changed man. And he knew he wouldn't always be so lucky.

That night he couldn't sleep. He looked at the millions of stars above him, thinking solemnly and with full focus: What happened today is unacceptable. Death must be conquered. From now on, that is my first and foremost aim in life. That is the quintessential first goal of the transhumanist.

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In the winter, Dean Graybury was barely successful in getting Jethro Knights admitted back into Victoria. The university chancellor emphatically disagreed. A compromise was struck: Jethro wasn't allowed to live in the dormitory on campus. And one more issue with him, the chancellor fumed, and he would be expelled unconditionally. The chancellor promised he would see to it himself.

Jethro took a studio with paint peeling off the walls, fourteen blocks from the university, on Lenard Street in the middle of Harlem. He rented by the week from a 300-pound Somalian lady who ran a hairstyling shop underneath his place—and a brothel a floor above him. He found himself content in Harlem. It was good to be away from the drunk Greek brats, the brainless jocks, and the showy student consumers strutting their newest shoes, handbags, and jewelry—some of which contained blood diamonds from the Congo. Most importantly, his studio was only a twenty-minute bike ride away from the boatyard where he intended to build *Contender*.

Two years later, at the Fillmore Yacht Club, Gregory Michaelson waited tensely for Jethro's response after asking whether he wanted to be a gorilla on his dad's yacht, *Blue Lagoon*. Something deep inside Gregory wanted Jethro to take offense, to stand up and challenge him back. Gregory couldn't think of anyone else on the planet who thought so little of him, who wouldn't show him the most basic social respect or recognition. This time, Gregory thought, there was no pool cue to protect Jethro against the bigger, stronger guy.

Jethro Knights stopped working, left the spinnaker sail on the ground, and stood up calmly. He turned around, facing his peer. Jethro's expression was unconsciously blank. It was obvious he didn't take any offense or register any challenge. His opponent would have to have real value for that to occur. Instead, Jethro looked behind Gregory and observed *Blue Lagoon* two docks down. The forty-ton monster wooden yacht took up a whole finger of berths. One glance at it made Jethro positive *any* modern, twelve-foot fiberglass Laser could outclass the splintery behemoth in *any* sailing competition.

"I'll pass, Greg. I'm only interested in boats that will help me prepare for my circumnavigation."

Gregory nodded at the man, acquiescing and hating him.

Jethro bent back towards the sail and continued working quietly.

Awkwardly standing there and unsure of what else to say or do, Gregory muttered, "Suit yourself. See you tomorrow at the town hall forum then?"

Gregory saw Jethro freeze for an instant, a sharp tension momentarily clutching the man's body. Then from behind his shoulder, Jethro said, "Sure, Greg. See you there."

## Chapter 4

There was extensive vigilant security at the Transhumanism Town Hall Forum. Apprehensive Secret Service men wearing sunglasses and dark suits communicated with a dozen sharpshooters who lined the nearby dormitory roofs via Bluetooth headsets. Police and campus security were ubiquitous, spread throughout the crowds. The President of the United States and other attending government officials promised they were there to objectively consider transhumanism, thus creating a stir of excitement and nervousness all over campus and the surrounding metropolis. Already the conflict of religious imperatives versus transhumanist aims was being called the next great civil liberties war—one that would likely dwarf the race and gender movements by its global impact.

Over 5,000 religious zealots and protestors yelled and marched in front of Victory University's rotunda. They spilled out from underneath the building's Romanesque facade of forty-foot pillars, onto a grassy, soccer-sized field adjacent to Freemont Library. They carried banners and signs: *Artificial Intelligence Will Destroy Us; Cloning is Evil; Religious Faith is the Key to the Future; Stem Cells Advancements are Made from Murdered Babies; Being Human is to Remain Human; Biology and Machines Should Never Merge; Only God Deserves Power Over Death.*

In between the protestors, numerous motorcades arrived. Each vehicle stopped on the barricaded cobblestone driveway in front of the rotunda, dropping off a governor or a senator. Each car was met by a throng of journalists: reporters with microphones, television crews shouldering video cameras, and photographers snapping pictures. Some politicians smiled, stopped, and said a few choice words. Most jostled up the stairs until they were inside and away from the chaos.

Other invitees, such as important religious leaders and award-winning scientists from across the country, as well as students and professors from the surrounding campus, also made their way through the crowds into the town hall forum. A few VIP invitees—each protected by bodyguards—also navigated the protestors; they were famous entrepreneurs, like Phil Holbec, CEO of Atlantis Software, which ran in virtually every computer on the globe. Or Tom Wolfson, the powerful financier who recently bought Phillips Bank when its stock price collapsed in two days—from forty-five dollars to sixty-two cents. Or Frederick Vilimich, owner of Calico Oil, one of the richest men in the world.

Minutes before the town hall forum was scheduled to begin, cheers and whistles erupted in the crowd. Reverend Belinas had arrived. The preacher wore a dramatic white gown, embroidered with gold and purple bands on its sleeves—the colors of his church and movement. His presence quickly divided the crowd in half; like a saint parting a waterway, he walked through the protestors towards the rotunda. Some followers cried and got down on their knees, casting prayers and wishes his way. Others pushed in and desperately tried to touch him.

Belinas was the self-appointed leader of Redeem Church, the fastest growing religious trend in America. Besides its quasi-evangelical Christian practices and loud anti-transhumanist agenda, his church was increasingly known for its strong governmental ties and massive financial resources. People trusted Belinas with their money and power because of his unequivocal faith in God, his unblemished piety, and his intense devotion to the world's poor. He was, as the media often reported, "an authentic Christian leader who takes orders directly from the Lord—and no one else."

Walking through the crowd he saw a disfigured paraplegic man in a wheelchair, holding a sign: *FAITH IN GOD—NOT TRANSHUMAN SCIENCE.*

Belinas stopped, knelt on one knee, and prayed with him, tightly clasping the man's hands. The crowd around them went silent for thirty seconds, until they finished. Then the preacher was on his way again, hurrying up the steps to the rotunda, a determined look in his eyes. Behind him the crowd waved and cheered.

The motorcade for the President of the United States arrived last, ten minutes late. Spectators clapped and whistled. Others cursed and yelled. Some simply watched, unsure of what to think or feel. The President, surrounded by tall Secret Service men, waved casually to the people as he climbed out of his vehicle and walked towards the rotunda. The Leader of the Free World bore a bemused smile.

Inside the rotunda were forty narrow tables with three chairs apiece, loosely arranged in a circular format by quarter sections. Each table had a microphones on it. The President, senators, and various governors, as well as the university chancellor, sat near the north wall in one section. A huge, imposing American flag hung behind them. Another fourth of the tables were occupied by clergymen, anti-transhumanist group leaders, and preachers like Reverend Belinas. In the third section sat thirty-five students, professors, and business people who were included to give the event a town hall feel.

In the last section was a small team of transhumanists: two robotic designers, a geneticist, a cryonics specialist, a cyborg technologist, a longevity scientist, a virologist, a cloning expert, a biotech ethicist, and an artificial intelligence programmer. Representing them were Dr. Preston Langmore and Dr. Nathan Cohen. Towering behind this group was a squad of eight-foot-tall bronze statues: Roman soldiers bearing spears; they were part of the building's historical decor. It made the transhumanists appear as if they were under guard and on trial.

Scattered everywhere else in the rotunda, both kneeling and standing, were news teams with their equipment.

The university chancellor grabbed his microphone and stood up, loudly clearing his throat. The inside of the noisy rotunda quickly came to order.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentleman. It is with great honor that I welcome the President of the United States, our esteemed senators and governors, and other guests, to our town hall forum at Victoria University.”

There was clapping in the audience and flashes from reporters' cameras.

“We have all come here together today to discuss the future of technology and science for our country's safety and civil order as it relates to transhuman ideas, and to give pause as we carefully consider concepts that have the power to forever alter the human race for better—or possibly for far worse.”

The chancellor continued his opening speech, meandering through carefully crafted sentences, lauding the current administration's running of the country, while subtly cautioning it against social upheaval created by transhumanism. When he turned the floor over to the Senator from Kansas, the short, obese politician reiterated the same generalities, the same embellishments over the handling of the country's welfare, and the same insistence on a conservative methodology when dealing with anything unorthodox—such as transhuman science.

“America must remain a responsible, cautious, and slowly adapting country,” said the senator, bumbling on. “These are truly challenging social times that call for patience from all walks of life in our great and diversified land.”

Afterward, still another official, Senator Shuman from Texas, reached for his microphone and repeated the same bland cautionary statements as the former speakers, smiling broadly for the constant photographs being snapped.

Jethro Knights and Gregory Michaelson sat with other invited philosophy students, watching. Jethro was anxious to hear what changes and conclusions the forum would bring about. Obviously, leaders of the government wanted to stop terrorism across the country and let transhuman scientists improve the human condition, Jethro assumed. He knew this forum was being heralded as a breakthrough moment for the transhuman movement. After the landmine incident in the Congo—something he replayed daily in his head—he felt more strongly than ever that he was going to dedicate all his life's energy to this movement's success. He was excited to be there that evening.

Jethro waited in his seat, his eyes fixed on the famous speakers to say something, to do something, for the government to step up and announce important policy changes and brave new directions—so

the country could embrace the future, and science could lead the way forward. Human advancement via applied science and technology was obvious, wasn't it? Everyone wanted to better themselves and become the best they could be, now that modern technology was so powerful and capable. It was the only rational path conscious entities immersed in evolution could take.

But those speeches did not come. Instead, he heard empty words, empty meanings, like an absurdly long drawn-out handshake, designed to give the effect of playing nice and hoping for the best, but without ever grabbing hold of anything substantial to shake. He heard the words, *God, peace, unity, decency, equality, caution, responsibility, and faith* mentioned many times, sometimes twice in the same sentence. He heard talk of everyone moving together as one society, as one culture, and deciding slowly—for our children, for our grandchildren—where we wanted to go as a people, as a nation. The substance of the speeches was less than tangible, less than conclusive. It was borderline pathological gibberish. Was no one going to stand up and say something real? Even if it was to deeply criticize transhumanism?

Jethro looked around at the blank faces and wondered if only *he* noticed this. Everyone frolicked, smiling for their constituencies, the public, and the press—comfortable only to say nothing controversial. Jethro looked at the town hall forum brochure he had received at the door and saw that fourteen of the sixteen statespersons present were lawyers, including the President. Where were the philosopher rulers? All he saw was the pettifoggers—many of whom had never created a damn thing in their lives, he thought. Many of whom had never taken a brave step alone anywhere. Many of whom had never had an independent thought on anything. The same damn ones fronting special interest groups and not the nation's people and their highest interests. Deep inside Jethro, a dreadful feeling dawned, a feeling that further spoiled his belief in the American system and its government, which were strangling transhumanism.

Gregory Michaelson felt poles apart from Jethro. He was at home with the speeches. The Texas Senator's meandering voice was pleasant and soothing. Gregory yawned, noticing the gray suit the politician wore—possibly a recommendation of his father's. He was a good friend of the family's, after all. It didn't fit him that well, though, Gregory thought. He's old and his shoulders can't hold up good suits anymore, at least not without custom tailoring. What a pity to lose style. Now the U.S. President—whom he personally met twice before—sat there coolly, as if on a beach in the Cayman Islands. He wore a solid Italian suit with gold cuffs. Very classy, yet just conservative enough. On the other hand, his expression could use some work, thought Gregory, smiling with mock approval. He's betraying too much boredom. He's probably thinking about the basketball lineup for the college playoff games this coming weekend. South Carolina versus Indiana. Arizona versus Oregon. And why not? Gregory was doing the same, even though his logic final was tomorrow, the last of his tests before next week's graduation.

For a moment, Gregory considered why everyone was at this much-hyped forum. Truth was, it was all just too much. Too dramatic. Too much hero in it, this transhumanism life extension stuff. Who wants to live forever anyway? And be bionic and perfect? To go through this, day in and day out? Eighty or so years was plenty. It seemed so much less taxing to dress well, be polite, put all your rules in one small book, and control everyone from there—including yourself. It was just easier to follow the status quo. He had always believed the status quo was beautiful and correct. It had worked for centuries, hadn't it? What was wrong with believing in God anyway, whether he existed or not? Sunday church was only an hour. Leave Him at the door if that's all you feel. Everyone is happy then. The seas remain smooth.

Gregory was the worst type of believer, but not atypical. He believed, but he was one who didn't care to even find out if it was worth believing. One who accepted responsibility for as little as possible regarding his faith. Just enough to get noticed for doing the job properly. Life was good, he thought, as long as nothing was too deep. Nothing too serious. Nothing to sweat over. Being human was too amusing to complicate it with worries about the drama of dying someday. He yawned again, looking at

his watch.

Eight seats over, Jethro sat frustrated, his anger mounting. His hands tightly gripped the edge of the table in front of him, pushing it towards the center of the Earth. Only thirty minutes into the town hall forum, he realized how serious a failure the event was already. He felt naïve and ashamed for hoping it might help, and even transform, the transhuman movement. He slapped his right hand on his face, fighting off the dreary ineptitude and falseness all around him. Normally unfeeling and disconnected from others, the reality of imbecilic officials and their anti-transhumanist notions directly affected him. It would directly affect his life—and possible death—if he didn't do something about it.

Jethro thought of the landmine again and could hear the clicking noise in his head. These people *were* that landmine. A much more vicious type. They aimed to paralyze him, to jeopardize his future, to degrade his brilliant life into passive mediocrity and subservience—with the end goal of death as their final slap in the face. They needed to get out of the way with their stupid ritual of empty talk and waffling. Enough of this nonsense, he felt. Let's just get to work. We don't have to die. Death is a disease, not a rule. The human body is just a start, not a coffin.

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Nearly an hour into the Transhumanism Town Hall Forum, another senator, ballooning with niceties, motioned his hand towards Dr. Preston Langmore and introduced him as one of the most prominent spokespersons of the transhuman movement. The senator invited Langmore to offer suggestions for how a peaceful and practical integration of life extension and human enhancement science into American culture might be achieved.

Langmore smiled and stood up. “Good afternoon, Mr. President, senators, students, professors of Victoria, and others in the audience. It's nice to be back on campus. And, of course, to see how things haven't changed.”

Muffled laughter rippled out. Langmore, the President, and many of the politicians and business leaders had formerly studied or taught at Victoria. The university remained both a breeding ground and a battlefield for progressive politics, demonstrations, and even new social movements.

“But what brings me here today is even more urgent than the clashes we saw years ago. We are on the verge of so much scientific change that governments and citizens can no longer deny it's here, they can no longer deny it's actually happening. Soon, artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, cryonics reanimation, and a practical sentience for our species through science will arrive. Soon, the field of transhumanism will transport all peoples to healthier, more fulfilling lives. And if we in America don't lead these changes on our planet, then China, Russia, Germany, or some other nation will. And wouldn't it be a shame to see the United States lose its longstanding global dominance of scientific advancement and achievement?”

Langmore paused, looking about the rotunda. “My fellow citizens, we are on the edge of a vast transformation of existence—one that may hold the key to massive leaps in intellectual history, technology, quality of life, and yes, even spirituality.”

Fifteen meters away, Reverend Belinas frowned.

Langmore continued his speech, and it remained compelling for the first two minutes. But then he downshifted, leading everyone laboriously through the history of transhumanism and the arcane parts of its science and technology. Although scientists were rarely exciting public speakers, this crowd spent their lives around professional speakers and demanded far more. Soon the President tired. The senators and governors eyed their cell phones. Students yawned and texted one another. Others glanced at their watches.

Six minutes later, the impatient Senator from New Hampshire interrupted the scientist. “Dr.

Langmore, we know all this. And we all know the current state of affairs with the transhuman movement. There's no question about the possibilities of some of the science, if taken cautiously. But what we want to know is why there's been such a recent uptick in violence and animosity regarding the movement. Two years ago it was a side issue. This year, it's tearing the country apart. I haven't seen this much polarization since the abortion struggles thirty years ago. With 20 percent unemployment, we don't have money or time for polarization. We all want to know what can be done about it. What is the right direction forward?"

"That's exactly right, Senator," said the President, speaking for the first time. "Dr. Langmore, domestic terrorist attacks are occurring everywhere in the country, fifty million people are unemployed, and many religious Americans believe we are quickly nearing the biblical end of time. We want concrete answers about how to steer this ship of modern technology and science you're carrying that's causing such heated controversy. You're one of the leaders of the movement. Give us ideas to consider and we'll consider them."

Langmore looked dubious, "With all due respect, Mr. President, using your analogy, we can't steer a ship that's never left dock. And with the way the dictatorial National Association of Health is right now, our oppressed movement isn't a ship, but a raft at best, crudely put together with yarn, twigs, and a few rusty nails. We need real policies and real funding to construct a sturdy vessel and get it sailing out of the harbor so that people can benefit from its scientific advancements. We need government to either support us or move out of the way. Transhuman science is the greatest potentiality of our lifetimes. Let me repeat that: Transhuman science is the greatest potentiality of our lifetimes."

"Now, take it easy, Dr. Langmore," the President said carefully. He leaned in on the table, towards his microphone. "You know we can't just order the National Association of Health to repeal the rules it has made, or to freely dole out money for transhuman scientists and their research. Government is an important player in this, regardless of how you feel about it."

Over the last decade, the National Association of Health—or NAH, the U.S. Government's health arm—single-handedly squashed most public funding for transhumanism and experimental life extension ideas. But far worse, it also imposed esoteric laws passed by Congress that forbade testing of many of those ideas in the private sector. The industries of cryonics, cloning, stem cells, genetic alteration, and human enhancement were drowning, half dead in the water. A rogue group of right-wing politicians, those who considered Sunday church a central part of their existence, pieced together the new anti-transhumanism research laws—largely under the radar of the public. They became caveats of larger political agendas, as the country withdrew into a deep, enduring economic slowdown. One year it was to limit the stem cell strains to five variations. The next year it was to retract millions of dollars of government funding for cryonics until more ethics reports were completed on the subject. The following year a massive government institute, the Fountain Center, which focused on downloading consciousness into computers—the pinnacle of neurotech—was shut down indefinitely.

Politicians said the institute and its programs were of no immediate help to the public, despite its being the world leader in the neurotechnology field. Eighteen months later, the institute was remodeled into a development center to care for American children with severe autism. The lead senator who pushed the bill through told the press how proud he was to create 318 jobs at the new autism institute. He failed to mention that an independent study group believed the Fountain Center's research and technology, if allowed to develop over the next quarter century, would eventually spawn over 500,000 new high-paying jobs by utterly transforming the field of neuroscience—let alone what benefits it might have brought to many millions of people and their brains.

Scientists cried wolf and lobbied against the NAH's anti-transhumanist ways. But amongst the deteriorating economic conditions around the nation, the public shrugged. It was easier to worry about discount superstore yellow-tag specials, what new free voucher the government was issuing, and which married Hollywood star might be having an affair. The brazen television behemoth IMN wouldn't even comment on the cutbacks or new anti-transhumanism laws. It was their method of contributing to the

decline of ideas that were in opposition to conservative politics and what their leading news anchor famously trumpeted “the very smart word of the Bible.”

The damn 2,000-year-old Bible, Dr. Cohen thought with absurdity, remembering the anchor's popular words; meanwhile, he watched Preston Langmore try to talk sense into the President and the crowd in the rotunda. Cohen already knew the town hall forum wasn't going to make any difference at all. The scientist closed his eyes and rubbed his temples, wondering if anyone could win over these people, if anyone could make the struggling tide of transhumanism wash over the ignorance and fear, and bring about a new world.

Then, abruptly, a voice shot out and filled the entire building, bouncing off the thick century-old walls. A voice not called upon to speak, but booming, baritone, and sharp—without a hint of respect for its listeners, or pretense of it. It came from the far end of the hall and set a strained silence upon the rotunda. People turned their heads to see who it was.

“Are all the politicians here totally insane? Or just plain stupid?” the voice asked loudly. “Or maybe just cowards? Trying to patch the NAH to work is a waste of time. What you need to do is abolish the NAH—just totally get rid of it. And let scientists do their research, and let entrepreneurs legally fund it. If you just get out of the way, transhumanism will work out in everyone's best interest; it will benefit our economy and the lives and longevity of every American.”

The student was Jethro Knights. Fifty cameras turned abruptly to capture him. People nodding off in the room quickly came to attention. Gregory Michaelson's cool demeanor turned into the confused impression of an idiot. He looked to his left, searching for Jethro's blond head, recognizing his voice. *That voice!* he thought, shocked. He saw Jethro, standing tall and adamant.

Two security guards rushed over to the man to stop him from speaking again, but an interested female governor, admiring Jethro's Vikinglike demeanor, asked him to introduce himself and further explain his point of view.

“This is supposed to be a town hall forum, after all,” she said, looking at the President with a demanding firm nod of her head.

Jethro bowed slightly with gratitude and continued.

“My name is Jethro Knights. I'm a fourth-year Philosophy student here at Victoria. You see, it's the NAH, like so many government organizations, that has already stunted the growth of this country for over three decades. The NAH started off as a way to monitor and control basic health science issues in the mid-1970s, but then broadened out to control euthanasia, cryonics, cloning, genetics, neurotech, artificial intelligence—eventually all transhuman science and its industry. But the NAH now also has its hands in the food industry, senior citizen learning, logging, environmental standards issuance, and much more. Even obscure things like potato farming. I'm not kidding. There's a three-million-dollar budget for monitoring potato crops in the Dust Belt. A now deceased Senator from Ohio attached it eleven years ago as a hidden rider to a larger congressional bill, and it's been in use ever since.

“The point is that our country and its scientists can't make headway against the bickering, conservative, patched together governmental watchdog groups controlling us. We're professionally asphyxiated already. What U.S. scientists need is the freedom to create and the freedom to implement their advances. And since it's our lives at stake with transhumanism—the very nature of our existence—we need to let science lead the way. Every time someone gets in the way of life extension and human enhancement goals, every time a new anti-transhumanist law is passed, every time you decide to hinder scientific progress, you are knowingly shortening the lives and productive working hours of transhumanists and your own citizens. We have a specific legal term for that type of behavior in this country. It's called *manslaughter*. And it's not just the individual whose life you are prematurely ending, it's the country's prosperity as a whole.

“Don't you realize that China, and maybe India too, will surpass us in innovation in just a few years? Only a decade ago, that was unimaginable. Now many nations are quickly catching up with us. Can't you see it was science that made our country great in the first place? And it's what can make our

country great again. Especially since we have a game-changer in front of us. Something truly transformational. If we just allow transhumanism to thrive, prosperity from longer and healthier life spans will benefit us all in so many ways—psychologically, biologically, financially. If not, we may dwindle away and die in the remains of our own bureaucratic mess and the former glory of a once-great nation. This is a matter of life and death. Every man and woman in this room wants to be improved and live longer, healthier lives. Every man and woman will directly benefit from this."

Jethro paused, scanning the audience. He ended with, "Do we really want to remain animals for the rest of our days when we can be so much more? We must disband the NAH and the anti-transhuman mindset in this country. We need to forge ahead and stop being afraid of the unknown—the transhuman unknown."

The rotunda was silent for a long time after Jethro stopped speaking. In those moments every person believed in the speech's common sense, in the potential of transhumanism, in modifying and improving the landscape of traditional human experience. The logic was inescapable. But then—slowly—their minds, egos, and fears lumbered around to the immediate tasks facing them. They remembered about their need to be elected to office; about what their constituents would say; how their churches would cast judgment; how their mothers, spouses, and friends would react; how they would be viewed, tallied, and callously spit out in public. Finally, they remembered their own fears of the unknown.

Preston Langmore stared at Jethro Knights and contemplated him. Though he'd never seen the student before, he sensed an immediate connection. So did the oil baron, Frederick Vilimich, who sat only twenty chairs away from the student.

Reverend Belinas also watched Jethro. The preacher unwittingly felt sick. For a moment, he found it hard to breathe—as if he were being choked.

Langmore turned to the President and broke the silence, blurting out, "Mr. President, that student is exactly right. The NAH must be disbanded. It's a bullying, nonfunctional entity that's sinking us all. It's exactly what I suggested eight years ago to Congress and the former administration, and no one listened. Now look where we are."

Jethro sat down. The cameras remained on him long after his speech, some zooming in on his intense blue eyes. It was the only noticeable element of his appearance that suggested he'd just given the U.S. President and top government members a hazing. The young transhumanist appeared unfazed, but the emotion in him was raw. He was ready to take a bat to people's heads. Or a pool cue, the university chancellor thought, glaring at him, grateful this particular student was finished with his college next week.

"This is absurd," roared Senator Shuman. "The NAH gone? It has a hundred thousand employees. We think it's not strong enough. Which is why there's such uproar to the transhuman movement. Eliminate it? What a joke! And, by the way, when do we let some random student express his opinions openly without being called on? Especially when he implies we're all murderers?"

An uncomfortable tension washed over the rotunda. The chancellor continued glaring at Jethro. Senators and religious leaders looked peevish. The transhumanists looked grim. Only Dean Graybury smiled inwardly.

The President of the United States cleared his throat purposefully, and all attention in the rotunda turned to him. "Ladies and gentleman, I agree with the senator and, I think, most others in this room. Disbanding the NAH is not an option. It's one of our largest governmental entities with some of our best people in it, like Senator Shuman."

The President paused for a moment, his hand circling in the air, preparing to emphasize something important.

"These are difficult questions we are considering today, and we must take time and make sense to carefully pave a path so the citizens of this country will be content and safe. So healthcare can improve. And religious beliefs can coexist with the modern age. And the American economy can profit. Folks,

let's try to work out some real options that benefit everyone. Let's try to work together and find a solution so everyone can be happy."

The rest of the town hall forum was pointless. The ideas discussed revolved around suggestions that the transhuman scientists make more sacrifices in their research: stopping a controversial project in Wyoming; changing the direction of a study in Minnesota; closing a bionics research center in Rhode Island; leaving a word like "cloning" out of a major upcoming paper from a Florida university—calling it "zygote division" instead. Emphasis was put on pushing the scientific direction as far away from the concept of transhumanism as possible. Jethro Knights left before the forum concluded.

"Good old-fashioned, basic health," the President declared. "That's what people really want. Make your movement sound more like transhuman chicken soup. Neutralizing the rhetoric will help everyone and also calm people's nerves."

Ultimately, the government only wanted the polarization of the country and the terrorism to stop, and to take from transhuman science only that which was ethical from a conservative Judeo-Christian point of view—which was very little. The rest of the experimental life extension and human enhancement research would best be discarded, it insisted.

For Langmore, the forum was both a disaster and an utter failure. His scientists desperately needed federal funding to jump-start their fields. They also needed laws and regulations removed so they could openly do their experiments. Without the ability to experiment, everything else was pointless. Currently, many transhuman scientists were secretly working at night on their projects in university labs. Or in their own garages with inferior scientific equipment bought secondhand off the Internet. Many used their own negligible funds and resources to try to accomplish their research. Some were Nobel Prize recipients who were all but outcasts in their own nation. It was an appalling, embarrassing way to move their immensely promising fields ahead.

Perhaps, if we all go back to riding bicycles and living in teepees we'll solve global warming too, thought Dr. Cohen, disheartened. He wondered whether the world was teetering on the brink of a second Dark Ages. His mind flashed to Galileo, Copernicus, and Giordano Bruno—scientists who were chastised or burned at the stake for their revolutionary ideas that later propelled civilization forward.

Why are people always so stupid and afraid? thought Dr. Cohen in dour frustration, running fingers through his mushroom hair.

## Chapter 5

Forty-eight hours after the Transhumanism Town Hall Forum, Russian oil magnate Frederick Vilimich arrived via his private jet in Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir. With his team of seasoned engineers and geologists, Vilimich planned to spend five days scouting out the nearby Himalayas to determine their oil production capabilities. He believed Kashmir might possess an untapped trove of global crude. The ongoing war in the region meant it was a shrewd time to acquire resource concessions from governments and landowners.

Vilimich was a huge, boisterous, middle-aged man with a thick, four-inch-long beard. Standing 6 feet 7 inches and built of solid muscle that had the ungainly habit of protruding out of his clothes, the Russian mogul towered over nearly everyone he encountered. He had to crouch low just to walk through his jet and make it out of the doorway without banging his head.

Descending the stairs of his plane to the tarmac, Vilimich was excited about his trip. Discovering new oil fields was one of the greatest pleasures of his business. As soon as he started walking towards the airport terminal, however, he began to feel weak and nauseated. The feeling didn't surprise him. A week ago he had begun to notice a strange pain in his lower left abdomen. It was accompanied by short spates of weakness, dizziness, and headaches. In the terminal, he told his team he had to sit down and

rest for a minute. The lead engineer immediately suspected something was seriously wrong. His normally vigorous boss was pale and out of breath. He sent the other engineers to a hotel and took Vilimich to the city's main hospital.

In the dated infirmary, Vilimich's pain and symptoms grew worse. An Indian doctor with a blue turban came in to examine him. Before the doctor even uttered a word, Vilimich coarsely asked the man where he had received his medical training.

"In Delhi, sir."

Vilimich shooed him away, insisting that he would only be seen by a Western-trained doctor.

"Sir, we don't have one here in this hospital."

"Well then find one in the city somewhere."

The Indian doctor glowered back. "This is the biggest hospital in Indian Kashmir, with its best doctors. I assure you, there are no Western-trained doctors for hundreds of miles."

A nurse standing in the far corner of the room interrupted the men. "Excuse me. There is one doctor I know of—an American. She's in my mother's village, Kundara, near the Line of Control. She operates on wounded soldiers and anyone else who comes to her."

Vilimich was a decorated veteran of the Soviet-Afghan War, and he possessed a deep respect for war-zone doctors. He ordered the nurse: "Get this American doctor and bring her here. Go with a taxi immediately. I'll pay you whatever is necessary."

"Sir, she's four hours away by car—and very near to the fighting. No taxi from Srinagar will go there."

"Send her a helicopter then. I want *that* doctor in *this* hospital room in sixty minutes. I'm not a billionaire for nothing."

"Sixty minutes? That might be impossible," the nurse responded. "What if she's in the middle of a surgery?"

"*Make it possible. My lead engineer will help you.*"

Dr. Zoe Bach arrived ninety minutes later, transported by private helicopter. Vilimich was lucky. Zoe had been training village nurses that day and was able to leave her medical station for a few hours without a problem; however, she was irate with the Russian mogul before she even met him. It was insulting, Zoe felt, to refuse the service of capable Indian doctors—especially in their own country. It was also annoyingly presumptuous to expect a Western doctor to ditch her surgery post at a moment's notice, regardless that it was at the request of one the richest men on the planet. To make up for it, upon seeing Vilimich for the first time, Zoe coldly told the man she required a new 1000-square-foot hospital tent in Kundara as compensation for her medical services.

Vilimich grunted and instructed his lead engineer to order one immediately. The engineer disappeared into the hallway and began making calls on his cell phone.

Zoe was astonished that Vilimich had accepted her terms so easily. The new hospital tent—instead of the bombed-out mud hut in which she currently tended patients—would significantly improve the healthcare of thousands of lives in and around her bullet-ridden village. Elated, Zoe quickly proceeded to examine the Russian. She gave him a thorough physical and took numerous blood, stool, and biopsy samples. Ninety minutes later, after some of the results were in from the laboratory, she performed a colonoscopy with the hospital's substandard equipment.

After midnight, when Vilimich had recovered from the minor sedation of the procedure, Zoe entered his hospital room and approached his bedside. She looked tired and gloomy.

"I have some bad news for you, Mr. Vilimich. It appears you have advanced colon cancer. The test results and the visuals I recorded inside your intestines, while not conclusive, make the diagnosis highly likely. It's impossible with the equipment here to determine if the cancer is metastatic yet, though I'm guessing your lymph nodes are already affected. Either way, your situation is very serious, and you must go to a modern hospital immediately—meaning you must leave tonight on your plane. You need to see a specialist and prepare to undergo surgery, and then chemotherapy."

The Russian growled, fuming that he would have to abandon his Kashmir project without even having started it.

At home in Russia, Zoe's prognosis was spot on. Vilimich underwent surgery and began chemotherapy treatments at the best cancer clinic in Moscow. He was told that even though his cancer was advanced, he had reasonable odds of surviving and being healthy again.

A week later, a new hospital tent arrived at Kundara—and a stunning bouquet of flowers for Zoe from Vilimich.

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After he left the town hall forum, Jethro Knights returned to the boatyard. He cast his thoughts back on finishing his yacht. There would be ample time to plan a path in transhumanism and life extension on his sailing trip. Jethro's boat was almost complete. With only eight days of college left, he would soon be launching it and starting his circumnavigation.

On Tuesday of the following week, clad with paint all over his jeans and shirt, he left the boatyard and rode to school on his bicycle. It was his final senior seminar class in philosophy. Students were required to discuss their senior theses, their last papers before graduation—and the only time when they incorporated their own philosophical ideas into their work. Jethro wrote a twenty-four-page essay on a radical new transhuman philosophy he designed over the past two years; it was called TEF, or Teleological Egocentric Functionalism. The philosophy was the quintessential guide for all dedicated transhumanists, whom he deemed "Transhuman Citizens" because their foremost loyalty was defending transhumanist concerns, irrespective of their backgrounds, cultures, or nationalities.

Deeper than that, his essay expounded on the elite transhuman champion he called the "omnipotender": the ideal and zenith of the life extension and human enhancement populace. This person uses TEF to its full capacity, its cold precisionlike morality determined solely by its functionality. This omnipotender is an unyielding individual whose central aim is to contend for as much power and advancement as he could achieve, and whose immediate goal is to transcend his human biological limitations in order to reach a permanent sentience.

Even though Jethro knew he was still young and had much to learn, he considered his thesis a revolutionary call to arms for transhumanists, aimed at instilling a fighting spirit into the older docile scientists and researchers currently leading the movement. He wanted his philosophy and words to convince transhumanists of their moral right and obligation to rapidly push their ambitions forward, regardless of cultural headwinds or religious interference. The essay was titled *Rise of the Transhuman Citizen*.

Once on campus, Jethro locked his bike and walked up four flights of stairs to the top floor of Philosophy Hall. He stepped quietly into his classroom, lost in thought about a problem on his boat's keel. The other students, including Gregory Michaelson, sat uneasily, watching him find an empty seat. Jethro's paper was scheduled to be the first thesis discussed. Amongst the intimate gathering of eleven seniors, all were required to read each others' papers before that day's class. They knew Jethro's essay was going to clash sharply with the professor's outspoken conservative views.

As usual, Professor Rindall strode into class five minutes late, his red scarf bouncing with his steps. He wore a spiffy black gentleman's suit bought on a recent trip to Rome. His mustache was carefully combed and pointed upward. His dyed brown hair—what little he had left—was gelled and parted. He looked obviously perturbed. After quickly greeting the class and mentioning some generalities about graduation, he turned to the first paper on his desk and hissed a long, annoyed sigh.

"Ah yes, Mr. Jethro Knights—our imaginary overman," the professor said.

The classroom chuckled.

"You know, Jethro, I haven't failed a philosophy student for fourteen years. The last one thought it coy to not turn in a paper at all. But this, if you don't mind, this rant of a thesis—this is not philosophy. Maybe, this is art. No, not even art. This is science fiction. Bad science fiction. B-rated science fiction. Other times that might be excusable. After all, being open-minded is a staple in this department."

The teacher scanned Jethro, looking for a reaction, perhaps something conciliatory. But the student's face was neutral. No, not neutral, thought the professor, but indifferent. He was downright unconcerned.

"Yet this paper, Jethro," Rindall said, holding up the manuscript portentously, "this is so highly infectious, so appallingly antisocial, it's hard to even accept as a reasonable answer to the assignment. In fact, it's hard to believe it belongs to the human race. Your so-called 'omnipotender' is monstrous, immoral, and inhuman. It goes against virtually every great principle of civility that society has ever reached. It's decidedly evil. I have always encouraged originality, but this is ludicrous. I don't know what to say except, hopefully, you didn't really mean to turn this in, in light of the fact that your other papers were excellent—at least from a technical point of view, when reviewing and critiquing other philosophers."

Jethro stared at the professor, silently.

"Well, say something, son. This is very serious. This is Victoria University for God's sake, and you're in the leading philosophy department in the world. It didn't get to be like that because of vicious nonsense like your essay."

During the past two centuries, many of the world's most influential thinkers studied or taught in Victoria's Philosophy Hall, a nondescript brick building that housed the university's philosophy department. It had been nicknamed "The Idea Factory of the West." But to Jethro, the pantheon of great thinkers seemed like a worn old club of fools, pretenders, and religiously biased speculators. They were like so many of the professors Jethro knew at Victoria: smart, articulate, witty, charismatic—but with few solid ideas to stand on. And none had teeth to bite anything. *Teeth*, Jethro thought, silently grinding his own—what's the point if we can't bite?

"Well, what do you have to say for yourself?" the professor asked. "The words in your essay are unacceptable."

Jethro watched him for a long time, then slowly answered, "My words define a coming new species. Most humans will reject them because they feel threatened and don't understand. Most humans are cowardly idiots."

"Eh?"

"And those other papers I turned in were extremely painful to write. I didn't agree with the ideas. But my job as a student was to follow the assignment and interpret those people. Given your philosophical parameters, I did the job."

Surprised, the professor squinted his right eye and tightened his lips.

"The last assignment was on my book, *Discourse on Divine Instrumentalism*—a national bestseller, just in case you've forgotten. That was extremely painful?" the professor asked, feeling the need to defend himself in front of his students.

Jethro leaned forward, rallied out of his passivity, and said, "Are you being serious? That paper was the most painful thing to write in four years of college. More so because so many others liked and agreed with your ideas. The entire book was awful, full of moronic drivel."

Students moved carefully, edgily in their seats. This was not how one spoke to the chair of Victoria's philosophy department, who the *USA Daily Tribune* named as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. Especially in light of how even the slightest positive recommendation from this professor would mean a guaranteed acceptance to any graduate school in America—or the clinching of a high-profile, high-paying job.

"An explanation is now due, Mr. Knights," the instructor said, trying to remain calm, underscoring the ferocity growing in him.

“If you insist,” Jethro said, and sighed. “Your book takes off where St. Augustine finishes. Back in the Dark Ages, back when toilet paper was still centuries away—let alone a microchip capable of processing a trillion bytes, or a plutonium-powered robot exploring Jupiter’s moons. It outlines and defends an imagined divinity—worse, a commercialized Judeo-Christian manifestation—by some fairytale inversion of tautological proofs that are overly complex, but end up nothing more than elaborate non sequiturs. I might be able to accept a glorified tale of an omnipresent force at least as technically plausible. But in the second half of your book you actually digress to your childhood inklings, literally, and anthropomorphize an altruistic deity using epistemological jabs of first-order logic—all intermixed with antediluvian Islamic, Hindu, and animistic maxims aimed at trying to prop up your various theories. The hodgepodge of verbiage does nothing but create contradictory pluralism designed to encourage readers to forgo reason—or perhaps to despise reason altogether. I suspect you did this all purposefully, knowing book sales would soar if pseudo-intellectuals could read philosophy without actually thinking. The whole endeavor probably funded your new convertible Mercedes purchase, which then makes it not such an awful book anymore, if we take an existential consequentialist perspective. Still—quite awful.”

Jethro didn’t intend to smile, but he did. “Is that explanation good enough for you, Professor?”

Jethro didn’t give a damn about the university anymore. He was leaving on his sailing trip in two weeks, and yesterday Francisco Dante had told him a reporter’s job at *International Geographic* could be arranged for him whenever he wanted. The boat would make a perfect platform for writing articles. Jethro doubted that graduating from Victoria was even important anymore. And these people sitting in the classroom with him—well, they were nearly useless to a transhumanist, and would likely always be. It was a lesson that the town hall forum had irrevocably taught him.

The professor stared at Jethro, speechless. He appeared stunned, unsure if Jethro was joking, or maybe drunk or on drugs. The students in the classroom were also shocked and unsure of what to think.

“Are you being serious?” the professor finally uttered.

“Of course, I’m being serious.”

“Are you in your right mind?”

Jethro frowned impatiently. “Of course, I am—never clearer. Look, Professor, I’m interested in immortality for me, and how to reach it. I don’t have a need for a god or faith or books like yours, which philosophize about things that might possibly exist outside myself—regardless of how eloquent they are, how real they may seem, or what bestseller list they top. The most succinct way I can say this is: It’s a complete waste of my very valuable time.”

The room remained still long after Jethro Knights stopped talking. Sunlight peered in through the building’s antiquated windows, illuminating tiny drifting particles of dust floating in the air. Someone cleared their throat, and the sound seemed unnaturally loud and disruptive, piercing the taut silence.

Finally, Professor Rindall’s twisted expression changed to a chagrined smirk. He started chuckling, a little too gaily. Some students cautiously joined him. The tension in the room began melting away.

“Come on, everyone. It’s okay,” he said. “It’s perfectly okay. This is a philosophy class, after all. We do invite new ideas here.” He waved his arm gregariously to his students. Twice.

Then, abruptly, Rindall slammed his fist on the table, sending fear throughout the room. “Just not stupid ones! Or malevolent ones!” shouted the professor, his expression now furious and aimed at Jethro.

A heavy, discomforting silence ensued again, washing over the class. Surprisingly, it was quickly broken from the other side of the room by Gregory Michaelson. He astonished everyone by firmly saying, “Jethro, you’re entitled to your own opinions, even when they’re obviously antisocial. But how can you sit there casting such unfavorable judgment on one of the greatest living minds on the planet—and his philosophical magnum opus? That seems absurd, even for you.”

The professor eased, smiling at Gregory—that smile of bonding with a favorite pupil.

Jethro turned aggressively to Gregory. “Stay out of it. You’re not the real thing. You and just about

everyone else in this room don't have a future in philosophy. Your future is in law, and maybe worse: politics. These classes are just stepping stones to your BMWs, your fancy parties, your pretense at power in society. For me, this class, my thesis, and my degree are really about philosophy and how I apply it to my life. I am a philosopher in the true sense. Not a future law student thinking about grad admissions and summer internships at Barney & Fleturstein Law Offices or whatever ambulance-chasing, corporate-suing cheat shops you're going to end up at. Or worse: brownnosing as a political aide to Senator So-and-So of whatever loser party they claim to belong to as they systematically destroy America."

For an instant, Jethro appeared as if he might leap out of his chair and attack Gregory. People in the class were stunned by the fierce response and the escalating tension.

Jethro twisted around in his chair and said to all of them, "I don't even know why you people exist or even come here. Isn't there a better way to get into law school? Or to go into politics?"

Protectively, the professor walked in between Jethro and Gregory, bitterly shaking his head. He responded to the curveball, saying loudly, "They come here, Mr. Knights, for leaving a lasting mark on the world and its interpretation of the rules society has freely agreed to follow. They are great minds who drift through the halls of this school and department, prompted by a higher force. Remember our university motto: *In lumen tuo videbimus lumen*. In Thy light, we shall see light."

"In Thy light!" said Jethro. "The lawyers defending that imbecilic group that bombed and murdered those transhuman scientists in Illinois six weeks ago are former philosophy students from *this* department. What kind of light is that? It's screwed up—and we all know it."

There was a pause, a moment of introspection. Then denial. It was easier to change the subject and stay with the God talk.

"You know," the professor swaggered, regaining control of the classroom and speaking pensively, almost to himself, "I had dinner with the President of the United States and some of our top senators last week, as I usually do with all our most important alumni once a year. It was right after the town hall forum. A little informal meal. Reverend Belinas led us through an eloquent grace before we ate. He spoke of our belief and feelings for something higher than us, something grander than us. It was quite moving—and, of course, all very true. You should try it sometime, Jethro. Open your mind and heart to people, to love, to goodness, to positive energy, to something more grand and wise than your diminutive self."

Jethro sat rigid in his seat, plagued with disbelief—just like Dr. Nathan Cohen at the town hall forum every time the scientist heard the words "God" or "faith" or "prayer" mentioned. Jethro was unable to comprehend the irrationality in front of him, surrounding him, squawking at him. Its form seemed too monstrously idiotic to be authentic. He uttered, "You've got to be kidding me," without even knowing he said it.

"No, Jethro, I'm not kidding," the professor answered softly and gravely. "I'm not kidding whatsoever."

Professor Rindall walked back to his desk and slowly sat down in his chair. He now appeared to be lecturing to a lost, crippled beast who bewildered and disgusted him. "Regrettably, Jethro, I think we're all done considering your paper, your thoughts—and, frankly, even you altogether. There's really nothing more to say."

Rindall looked around the room, affirming this. "And so, with that, I'm going to ask you to leave now, Mr. Knights. Leave the class. I didn't realize your ideas were so—antisocial. Seeing that you graduate next week, it's too late to try to stop a man of your passion and intellect into razing himself. I've no choice but to pass you, as you have completed your assignments. But you've no place in this room, on our last day, with your attitude. And, shall we say, negative energy. Especially, as I prepare to send goodhearted, righteous-minded pupils into the world to take on troublemakers just like you. And they will. Oh, they will. They always have—and they've always won."

Jethro rose, gathered his books, and walked out, undeterred by the piercing glances around him.

The students and professor stared hard after him, as if watching a man walk off a ship's plank into the ocean a thousand miles from land. Jethro rode back to the boatyard on his bike. He thought little of the classroom incident, knowing it wasn't worth his time to consider. Knowing only that someday he would have to consider it—and somehow defeat what caused the professor and students to think that way. There was some mysterious devilish force, not just in that classroom, but saturating the entire planet and stifling the best potential in the human race, choking off life's most core promise. He had clashed with it many times in the past. But the thing had no obvious form or substance. No clear name with which to describe it. He only knew it was the same thing that made the town hall forum an utter failure. Or caused Professor Rindall's book to be a bestseller. Or made a wheelchair-bound man prefer faith in God instead of a cure to his paralysis. Jethro could not define that force yet, but he knew with certainty that one day he was going to war with it.

Back at his boat, Jethro focused on how to better strengthen the keel. Over the next two days, he found a solution and welded in the alterations. Soon he finished the final work on *Contender* and readied it for launch into the sea.

His last duty before he left on his circumnavigation was to post his thesis, *Rise of the Transhuman Citizen*, on a popular life extension blog. Whether the world agreed or not, it was time to cast his ideas directly into the universe.

## Chapter 6

Journeys that illuminate and change lives are not defined by schedules, money, or agendas—but by experience. Often, also by outcomes. If ever a journey were to help solidify a man into that which he wanted to become, was going to become, and had mostly already become, then Jethro Knights' circumnavigation qualified.

He left on a drab, cloudy day, the day of his college graduation, which he didn't attend and forgot was happening. He motored past the skyline where two great towers had once stood—built by science and engineering, destroyed by religion and ignorance—until he reached the Atlantic, then turned hard starboard. He shot the mainsail out, catching the wind aft, and aimed the boat towards the Bahamas—his first stop, nearly a seven-day sail away. He wouldn't drop anchor until reaching the pink beach of the famous island of Eleuthera, which he read about with envy years before in travel magazines.

Afterward, he was off to Haiti, Jamaica, Honduras, Venezuela, and through the Panama Canal into the Pacific Ocean. In time he'd go around the African horn, or through other canals and straights. The way was unknown, which is why it was the correct direction.

Like all great inward journeys, there was no curriculum. Just the notion he was sojourning around the world, his eyes open. He knew what he wanted to do with his next fifty years of life—ensure immortality for himself. This meant fully dedicating it to the field of transhumanism. But he wasn't sure exactly *how* he should go about that. To want to live forever—to become an omnipotender, one after ultimate power, as he had written in his senior thesis—there must be some superhuman commitment to it. There must also be some trustworthy and comprehensive philosophical framework for that intense a pledge. His philosophy, TEF, still needed much development. It needed extensive, careful thought so as to be flawless and indisputable. He wanted to make sure he truly understood it, could thoroughly describe it in his writings, could fully defend it logically—and could find the best path to achieve it.

He was young, after all. And surely, whether it be deadly landmines, ferocious storms, or murderous pirates, he wanted to look life and death in the face, and determine how best to be the worthy contender of his dreams. He believed he was that man already. The journey would let him know for sure. It would teach him about his strengths and reveal his weaknesses. In some ways the trip was a

gamble, a different way of walking around a jungle filled with hidden landmines. Sometimes, rolling the dice of destiny was part of the overall plan, especially if he was rolling so one day he would never have to roll again.

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Jethro Knights didn't travel alone.

Five hundred carefully chosen books accompanied him. Most were worn, bought at used bookstores on Eighteenth Street near Victoria University. Some were purchased from Internet sites. Others, the esoteric and hard-to-find ones, were borrowed permanently from the New York City Library. The books were his companions—faithful, unruly, energizing. He didn't have a mentor—never needed one—but he always had his books.

He was even more particular about choosing his books than choosing how to weld his boat together. He started with the best of the classics. Then intermixed them with modern nonfiction—everything from macroeconomics to anthropology to nuclear physics. Jethro was addicted to knowledge. He spent a month laboring through an unabridged 1400-page dictionary. There were also heavy textbooks on biology, chemistry, medicine, psychology, and sociology. A connoisseur of languages, his books were in English, French, Spanish, and Mandarin. He translated things when he didn't understand meanings. Dictionaries for Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit were aboard. Jethro read the most important book of his circumnavigation during the first week of sailing: *How to Become an Expert Speed-Reader*.

The man lived with his books. They were his constant companions, his inspiration. He was always reaching for a fresh idea, a new direction to consider. His brain acted as a sponge, absorbing everything; however, the sponge was attached to an austere mind—very exclusive, very judgmental, very conditional. Jethro strove to be the most conditional person on the planet. He liked or disliked, agreed or disagreed, precisely because of conditions. He couldn't understand how others did differently. The concept of being *unconditional*—whether it involves love, moral choice, or belief—was just a way people held power over others, a way to disqualify meaning and its effect. The less conditions, the more the universe was indistinguishable and unreasonable, leaving one little choice but to further give in, to eventually accept anything and everything, even one's own demise.

Jethro's boat was outfitted in the same way as his philosophies: simple, sparse, and functional. On board was a small but tough inflatable boat which doubled as a life raft, a propane stove, an icebox, a stereo, a guitar, a freshwater sink, a kitchen, and a toilet with a cold shower above it. His cruising electronics—nearly all of them bought secondhand—were a handheld GPS, a depth finder, a radar system, a small weather station, a barometer, a VHF, and a single-sideband radio. Nothing on board was expensive, but it was all necessary and of reputable quality. He learned to use the sextant on the stars in case the GPS failed. The radar alarm always remained on, ready to beep loudly when another vessel—usually a freighter ten times his boat's length—crossed his path.

His on-board food was carefully planned. The bulk of it was pasta, cereals, canned goods, and nuts. There were vegetables, like potatoes, carrots, and red cabbage, that would keep well in the bilge for long periods. Always cognizant of his health, he bought organic products when possible. He ate meat, but not often. He tried to consume locally made goods, not processed junk shipped thousands of miles at the expense of the planet's health and resources. There was an incredible assortment of spices in the galley; curry, rosemary, and basil were his staples. Garlic and chili peppers hung above his stove. A half dozen bottles of good Scotch and California red wine lay in custom-made holders near his library. Otherwise, his only drink was water, held in a fifty-gallon container built under the main berth. He had a rain catchment system to replenish his water when needed.

Outside of books and food, the boat was mainly packed with supplies and tools for repair situations. An old welding machine was tied into the guest berth, wrapped in extra sails. There were pieces of plywood and Douglas fir two-by-fours for emergency repairs if leaks occurred. Cordless drills and saws of varying scope were packed away. Bolts by the hundreds were neatly organized in a plastic compartment box. Plumbing pipes, boat paint, anchor rode, rope, and sail material littered the bilge holds.

For himself there was a laptop, a printer, a stereo, and a coffee grinder. His 110-volt convertor powered everything. His French press was the most used cooking amenity on the yacht.

His plan was to circumnavigate along the equator, give or take ten degrees either way. It was warm in those low latitudes, and he would mostly bathe in the ocean. At sunset, he loosened his fingers on his guitar, teaching himself a new song every week. A glass of wine or Scotch was often within arm's reach. Sometimes he tried whatever mild drug of choice the islands he visited favored: betel nut, pot, kava.

Jethro lived a superlative existence. Filled with much learning, thoughts from great books, and ideas. He was a young man coming into his own.

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In the Caribbean, Jethro's journal entry read:

*Sailed 112 miles today. Southwest towards Central America. Still thinking about my stop in Haiti. How the people struggle against poverty and malnutrition. The United Nations says 100 million children died from starvation around the world in the past ten years. I would never have believed that number until I saw the streets of Port-au-Prince. Tens of thousands eating nothing but cookies made of mud. Many children were too weak to even beg. Are governments around the world really so pathetic at keeping their people alive?*

*Now to Honduras. A tropical depression is forming in the Atlantic. Won't affect the winds for me—not yet at least. Blowing almost a straight downwind. Perfect. Wing on wing. GPS says 5.1 knot speed. Current is against me but I'm still making good time. Alternator on engine is giving me trouble. Next time at anchor will go to war with it. Solar panels more than producing enough power. Finished twenty-seventh book of trip today. Learning Caribbean island tune this week on guitar. Baking the Mahi Mahi I caught for dinner. Lots of rosemary going on top. Strangely, saw no ships today but lots of dolphins.*

After passing through the Panama Canal, a week of scuba diving in the Galapagos Islands, and a month-long sail to Tahitian waters, another journal entry read:

*Tahiti so lush. Isolated lagoons and thatched-hut villages. Super-friendly islanders. Learning to surf and climb coconut trees. Should be hitting Kingdom of Tonga soon. Spearfishing a tremendous amount. Training myself to hold my breath underwater longer and longer. Tomorrow is the sixth-month anniversary of my trip. What have I seen? How am I different? I've seen so much. Am I changed? I don't think so. Can one fundamentally change? One is always who they are. Change is just who they are becoming, who they are creating—their final transhuman self (if they can make it that far before they die). Finished four books this week. Also, heard back from Francisco finally. He was in Iraq again for International Geographic. Says he's lining me up with his editor to start my articles next month. He warned me not to blow it.*

In Nadi, the capital of Fiji, Jethro joined a conference call with Francisco Dante and Mack Cranson, the managing editor of *International Geographic*.

“Mr. Knights, Francisco tells me you’re just the kind of man we need,” said the editor. “Experience is important, but never as much as someone who can produce outstanding content—even if they’re a rookie. You’ll be doing the Reporter’s Notebook pieces. A thousand words long—short but sweet. Just one article a month should leave you plenty of time for sunbathing on that yacht of yours. Stories have to be tight. The research impeccable. One screw-up on a fact, and you’re fired. One deadline missed, and you’ll never get another email from us. This is the top of the journalism food chain, kid. Don’t screw it up. You’re the youngest we’ve ever hired.”

Jethro Knights’ involvement with the media—perhaps the most powerful social tool on the planet—was underway. His first story was due in four weeks, and he immediately sailed to Vanuatu to start it. The article was titled *The Secret Bush Tribes of Espiritu Santo*. It described Jethro’s three-day hike across the highlands into a remote part of the South Pacific where money, clothing, monogamy, and organized religion—such as Christianity—had never reached.

The photos Jethro took were astonishing: naked bush people with painted faces cooking lizards over open fire pits; tribe leaders armed with spears, hunting in the jungle, bones poking through the leathery skin of their noses; bamboo hut villages and complex animistic rites for the dead. Even anthropologists didn’t know Vanuatu still possessed such a lost indigenous population within the island nation. Only the Amazon was thought to have tribes that unaware of the outside world.

Jethro’s first article and pictures were an immediate success. Readers wrote and called in, applauding such an exciting story. Tens of thousands of people shared the article with their colleagues and friends online, boosting circulation.

Francisco sent Jethro a short email:

*Strong work. You’ve got eyes following you now.*

Afterward, every month, readers tuned in for Jethro’s stories: *Pirate Attack in the Straits of Malacca*; *Bomb Digging in Vietnam*; *Hunting Poachers in Borneo*; *Volcano Boarding in Papua, New Guinea*. His stories inspired the imagination of readers. It made them feel like they were right there, alongside Jethro, sneaking up on armed wildlife poachers or skimming down an erupting volcano on a sandboard.

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As valedictorian, Gregory Michaelson gave the leading student speech for his class graduation at Victoria University, which was held on the manicured lawn in front of imposing Freemont Library. Adding to Gregory’s triumph on the podium in front of all his peers was the certified letter in last week’s mail, informing him of his acceptance next fall to Boston’s premiere law school, with its knack of producing senators and governors. He coasted through his speech, confident that everyone envied him. His sentences meandered their way through fluffy subjects like the needed dignity of representing their beloved university in the professional world, the noble pursuit of philanthropic activities throughout their careers, and the loyalty required to be upright citizens of the United States and beyond.

He frowned at the end when the crowd erupted and cheered for him. Inwardly, he didn’t give a damn about what he said. He had written the speech in less than ten minutes in a handicapped bathroom stall at the back of the event. What was really on his mind was much more important: the party his father was throwing for him that night. And even more important than that was his new dalliance: the red-haired freshman who was playing so hard to get. Damn her, he thought. Now that

was something, and he promised himself he would score with her—or never speak to her again.

The next day was typical for Gregory and his socially mobile life. He woke up around noon, straining to remember what had happened. A fraternity buddy holding a half-finished beer stumbled into his room, burped, and reminded him.

“Greggy boy, wasn’t that grand last night? Jesus, you’re not still in your bathing suit? Where did that foxy redhead go? Boys saw her leave in a hurry this morning. Classic. See you in three months in Boston.”

Gregory’s first year in grad school proved easier than any in undergrad. Mostly he wrote essays, debated peers in class, and did extramural assignments. Formal tests with right and wrong answers were frowned upon in this historical elitist institution.

“If you’re here, in this classroom today, then you’re never wrong,” his professor said on the first day of class, a smirk on his face. “Get used to it.”

Such was his law school. Gregory excelled at the peculiar mix of drinking expensive wines and playing home video games. *Planet Warlord* was his favorite, but it was his video golf skills that drew respect from his gaming peers on campus. He was a regular at nightclubs and local bars, and followed professional football and baseball closely, able to quote endless key stats of the best players.

His friends were far too many, most courting him specifically for his father’s contacts. He was used to that. But at graduate school it had a special quality, much more intense than before. Students, especially those who weren’t from powerful or affluent families, were increasingly becoming serious about their futures and careers. They needed outside help to climb the professional social ladder. He winced when he realized how many in law school were already married and had actual work experience behind them.

With him, females were the worst though. They seemed programmed to insist on being his girlfriend. None were promiscuous or experimental anymore, like in undergrad. Gregory only wanted to have sex with them. He guarded himself vigilantly against accidentally getting one pregnant, just in case she tried to blackmail him into marriage. His father constantly warned him of that scenario. Gregory made his rounds, never without a condom in his wallet, never without a subtle grin.

In his third year, all that changed. At a nightclub he met a tall stunning woman with light blue eyes, white sandy hair, and a vibrant smile that often emitted laughter. Her name was Amanda Kenzington, and she possessed a confident glow many people found annoyingly pretentious but deeply intoxicating. Who could blame her? Her father was a wealthy orthopedic surgeon who no longer needed to operate—nor cared to. Two decades ago he had invented a tissue supplement for joints, which was now being used throughout the world. The equity of his patents put his net worth above a hundred million dollars.

Over the course of the evening and much dancing together, Gregory learned this and other valuable pieces of information about her. He was hooked. For the first time in his life, something clicked, something of lasting importance and meaning. It was a new experience for him, catching him totally by surprise. But at two in the morning when she prepared to leave, she blew him off.

“Let’s just go out sometime?” Gregory asked, stumbling after her as she walked away to catch a taxi with her girlfriends. “Why not? Just something casual.”

“Hmmm...I don’t think so, champ,” said Amanda, who then grinned flirtatiously, her white teeth showing. She sped up her steps a little. “You’re too nice a guy for me. It was fun dancing and all. See ya around.”

Gregory did an about-face towards the bar, stunned. He wondered if this had ever happened to him before. He couldn’t think of even one time. Abruptly, in drunkenness, he turned around, ran to her and tried again, grabbing her hand.

“Amanda, how about just for coffee? Come on. We have something here.”

Her lips bent upward into a confident all-assuming smile that swallowed her face. The type of grin only a princess with an eight-digit trust fund could ever make. The type where nothing wrong would

ever happen—and nothing ever did.

“I guess I can think about it. But probably not.”

Amanda briskly walked away and got into a waiting taxi, while looking over her shoulder and giggling loudly with her friends.

Gregory Michaelson’s family carried prestige and some wealth: a few million dollars, which in the prolonged recession was a lot more than it used to be. Nevertheless, Amanda’s level of family affluence was like a jaw-dropping new extreme sport: a personal jet to Barbados on weekends; an armada of live-in servants; nightly six-course dinners served on china that cost as much as Gregory’s red convertible BMW.

Gregory went back to the bar and drank himself into oblivion. Friends strapped him to their shoulders and carried him home. He wanted to forget the night and the girl—and whatever made him want her so badly. But he couldn’t. He found out through a mutual acquaintance that Amanda was doing a Master’s degree at a small, private all-girls school across town. He discovered what classes she took by bringing chocolates to the school’s 73-year-old secretary. Over the years, most boys who came from across town looking for the pretty rich girls brought flowers; however, she liked chocolates better. She gave him Amanda’s schedule and a map of campus, wishing him luck.

A few days later, on a Friday, Gregory went with a dozen roses to meet Amanda after her sociology class. Amanda smiled widely when she saw him, finding the flower gesture so lacking in originality that it actually became endearing. The last man who courted her, a son of a Tunisian sheik, had presented her with a century-old gold necklace acquired on a falconry hunting trip in Senegal. Now *that* was something, she thought, smirking to herself, and remembering being wrapped tightly in his muscular brown arms, in his Miami oceanfront penthouse.

Still, she accepted the roses and laughed at Gregory, taking her time to delicately smell each one. She agreed to dinner, telling him she was free the Tuesday after next. The ten-day wait was agonizing for Gregory. But over their meal at a small French restaurant, Amanda discovered she found him easy to laugh with and more handsome than she first thought. She was impressed with his knowledge of food and wine when he ordered for them both; however, she mostly just liked being chased. A senator’s son sounded exciting too. They started to date, and increasingly, she felt they looked good together. His tall body matched her own lengthy figure, and his brown eyes and black hair accented her Arian complexion; it created a melodramatic flair. She pictured herself with him on the cover of a classy women’s magazine and liked what she saw—both of them chic, glaring in style, a hint of that coked-out, dehydrated model look. And the sex they shared? She frowned. Well, she guessed it would do for the time being.

Amanda’s childhood made her the textbook case of a spoiled American brat. She never considered equality between the sexes. It was clear: Women were to run the show, and men to make the show happen. Like her mother, who presided over frequent dinner parties and a 12,000-square-foot home that was redecorated annually, Amanda existed to make sure the style matched the power. It was the peculiar nature of social superficiality that impressing others was the objective if oneself was too vain to be impressed.

The parents of Amanda and Gregory thought they were the perfect match for each other. Gregory’s father encouraged marriage after only one year of dating. Amanda’s father did the same. The older men imagined that two empires were meeting, forming a lasting union. Each family wondered how far up the social register their offspring might ascend.

The only problem was that the kids weren’t really in love. Gregory found out that his coy, insatiable girlfriend was an enormous amount of work. Amanda wasn’t sure Gregory was ambitious enough—he liked playing more than providing. She wondered if he could supply the grandiose life she wanted and was prepared to enjoy. But when families like theirs got together, love could work its way out later.

## Chapter 7

In Singapore, while *Contender* was drying in the boatyard for maintenance, Jethro Knights received a phone call at the marina office. It was Francisco Dante, who had recently been promoted to senior editor at *International Geographic*.

“Jethro, what's going on?”

“Boat's out of the water. I'm doing some bottom work in Singapore.”

“How's *Contender* holding up?”

“Fine. Just some routine maintenance and painting needed.”

Jethro wondered what Francisco wanted. His voice sounded edgy, and this was an unscheduled phone call.

“Been following the news in Pakistan and Indian Kashmir?”

“A bit,” Jethro answered cautiously.

“Our correspondent on the ground there got killed forty-eight hours ago. Shot to damn pieces. We think the whole region is going to blow. Two Third World nuclear giants about to duke it out. An Asian crisis of historical proportions.”

There was silence on the phone. Jethro knew what was coming next.

“We need someone there,” Francisco said. “We needed someone there yesterday. To stay for at least six months—maybe a year.”

“What about my boat?”

“We can cover it all. Just lock her up and tell the boatyard to send us the bill.”

The phone went silent again.

“Jethro, this might be worse than the Congo—plus you'll be all alone. A grueling, full-blown war zone. Possible genocide, if the rumors are right. And you'll be expected to write frequently, sometimes daily, if things are hot. You'll need to be right in the middle of the action.”

“Okay, I understand.”

“It's not a very safe, transhuman-like thing to do. But your writing skills are sure to be used. And the experience will help define your journey, perhaps even your manhood.”

The phone line went silent again.

Jethro mumbled, “True, it's not a very safe thing to do.”

“So you'll do it?”

Jethro stared longingly at his boat through the office's window, then said, “Yeah, I'll do it.”

The next morning an express shipping package arrived; it contained an *International Geographic* company credit card, a new telephoto zoom lens for his camera, and a one-way business class ticket to Islamabad, Pakistan. Jethro locked up his boat and headed to the airport. Eight hours later, he stepped off the plane, picked up his lone backpack, and took a yellow taxi towards the Indian-Pakistan Line of Control, thirty miles away. When he saw smoke and military helicopters in the distance, he tapped the taxi driver on the shoulder, saying, “Right here. Stop right here.”

The Pakistani looked at him, his face twisted with confusion. They were ten miles from anywhere. Outside was nothing but the base of the snowcapped Himalayas. Jethro paid the driver and jumped out, knowing better than to take a taxi into combat fighting. That was like driving around with the word “target” written on the side of the car.

Jethro covered his blond hair with a knit cap and stood on the side of the road. He stuck out his right thumb when the occasional car drove past. An hour later, a civilian vehicle picked him up and took him towards the Line of Control. In the back seat, he discreetly retrieved his camera from his backpack and hid it in his jacket. His index finger tensely rested on the shutter release button.

War always touches the essence of a person no matter how many times it's witnessed. As a

participant, it remains perpetually novel. The smoke, fires, and explosions never seem to stop or burn out. The sight of bodies torn to shreds, children orphaned, and buildings in ruins are penetrating and humbling—it's life, elevated and unmasked. The slumbering alligator in our brain awakes and tries to take over. Tragedy mixes with the summoning of a better life.

Later that day, when the sun was disappearing, Jethro checked into The Himalayan Inn, the main journalist hotel in Muzaffarabad. There were heavily armed guards hiding behind sandbags at the front entrance. Jethro would begin his work again tomorrow at first light.

A week later his first article started:

*Fourteen miles from Muzaffarabad, near the Line of Control in Pakistani Kashmir, a small bombed village is awash in activity—in tragedy. It's desperate and shocking. An old woman runs up to me, throwing her hands at my face. All ten of her fingers are pointing in unnatural directions—broken in different ways. She's another torture victim. To my right, a man wanders the dirt roads, calling out his child's name. In another part of the village, younger women grieve, complaining of multiple gang rapes by soldiers. I try to interview the husbands—those who are still alive refuse, turn away, and cry. War is a frothing beast.*

As any war reporter knows, this type of work could never be called a job. It's a pledge to reveal humanity, a passion for unpredictable consequences, a spiral through the worst and best of civilization. Daily, Jethro interviewed and photographed participants of the war—from weeping villagers, to armed Jihadists, to teenaged government soldiers listening to rock music on their cell phones. Often, bullets buzzed by Jethro's head or a bomb would explode nearby and send him scampering for cover or diving into a ditch. Transhumanism was always in his thoughts, the plethora of wounded and dead constantly reminding him of the need to overcome the fragility of biological life and the capriciousness of the human race.

After four months of working near the Pakistan Line of Control, Jethro crossed over to Indian Kashmir to report on the conflict from *that* country. It was the same nightmare; only the people and soldiers were bound by a different flag and religion.

Eventually, after another half year, the crisis died down. Journalists from all over the world, who once descended by the hundreds, now departed for the next global conflict hot spot. Third World nuclear war and 100 million dead never occurred. Government diplomacy and international finger-chiding reigned as the main news items to cover. The conflict continued—just as it had for sixty years—each side shelling the other from protected mountainside positions, doing little else except testing new artillery and showering terror on civilians ensnared in the crossfire. For now, however, the nuclear rhetoric and threats from politicians were gone.

Francisco Dante called Jethro, telling him he could return to his sailing trip and continue with his travel articles. Jethro was glad to leave; Kashmir and its horrors would remain burned in his psyche for the rest of his life. War does that. But through the battle zones, he also saw things that would give him emotional immunity and protection for his whole life. There, travesty and the overcoming of it were daily lessons. He learned to appreciate and recognize functional power. Military might. Fearsome, unabated leadership. Clarity and confusion from the media. The magic of a camera and a single startling image. The power of a heartrending story or of a charismatic individual to help turn an entire nation for or against something.

Before Jethro caught the flight back to his yacht, he had one more photo shoot to make. He needed pictures of the half-destroyed historical village of Kundara. He would stop there on his way to the airport the next day.

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Dr. Preston Langmore walked into Dean Graybury's office at Victoria University, eagerly greeting the man. "My old friend, what a pleasure to see you."

"It's great to see you too, Preston. It's been a long time," said the dean, jumping up and extending his hand.

"Yes, it has. Since that 'waste-of-time town hall forum,' as it's become known to us transhumanists."

Both men laughed, the kind of easy acquaintance that has been ongoing since their college years together in those exact same halls.

"So how's the movement going?" asked the dean. "Not much news coming out it seems—and more pressure than ever from the NAH and Uncle Sam. I hear the World Transhumanist Institute's *Future Living* magazine stopped printing. Is that true? I'm going to miss it terribly."

"Damn, yes—it's been a tough few years. We can't afford to publish it anymore. Advertising has fallen off a cliff. Donors are broke. In fact, no one seems to be able to do anything anymore. No one has a dime of funding and the scrooge government won't give a penny. And if they do, you can't even mention the word 'transhumanism' connected to the research, let alone try to do something directly for it."

"Yeah, I know. They've made 'transhumanism' a very dirty word."

"And they've made it witchcraft science to have anything to do with it," Langmore said obstinately. "Damn quasi-Christian-run government insists on making you want to die so you can meet Jesus and other celebrities in heaven. Sounds like a cheesy, B-rated Hollywood flick. People are crazy."

"Hopefully, there will be a breakthrough soon or something. My small group of friends here in academia sure hopes so."

"We're actually in the midst of trying new publicity and funding angles at the institute. It's more grassroots stuff, outside the usual realm of talking to scientists and entrepreneurs. In fact, I came here to try to locate a former student of yours about it. He was the young man who spoke up at the town hall forum. Do you remember him?"

"Sure I do," said the dean, smiling broadly, letting Langmore know by his reaction that he knew the student well. "His name is Jethro Knights."

"Excellent. So you *do* know him. Well, his senior thesis, *Rise of the Transhuman Citizen*, was posted a while back on a life extension blog. The essay has received heaps of attention in the transhuman underground and also on the Web, the grassroots side of the movement. Really, it's mainly the youth that seem interested. But many thousands of people have read it now, and some of them have re-posted it all over the Internet. The Institute's board and I want to see if we can get him to write more, possibly organize that grassroots energy. The thesis is quite aggressive and radical. But we need any traction we can get to make transhumanism more popular. We need to make headway somehow."

Langmore looked at his feet sheepishly, then continued. "We need new blood, new visionaries—perhaps even a new, bolder generation for the movement. It seems we old scientists and engineers are no match for the brazen politicians and Christian evangelists sweeping the public right now."

"Jethro is currently abroad for a few years," said the dean.

"Yes, it seems he's a journalist. But I couldn't get a hold of him through *International Geographic*. They wouldn't share any of his personal info. Legal policy, they said."

"He's sailing around the world and may not be very reachable. I haven't actually talked to him in two years, but a good friend of mine is his editor at *International Geographic*. I'll put you in direct touch with him and he'll make sure you and Jethro connect."

"That's exactly what I was hoping for."

The dean shrugged. "I don't know if it'll be useful, though. Jethro is still young and brash. He's got much to learn about the overall movement. And he's definitely not a team player, if you know what I

mean. In fact, he can be downright antisocial and unruly. But he clearly believes in transhumanism."

"That's fine. We were all young once. And none of us are team players unless there's an opposing team that needs to be played against out of necessity. And, right now, that necessity has arrived."

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In the middle of a breezy Kashmir afternoon, a driver took Jethro Knights to Kundara. It was his last scheduled stop before boarding a flight later that night to his boat in Singapore. Jethro was anxious to sail again.

Along the way, his driver described some of the main sites of the village: a bullet-ridden century-old mosque, a small functioning school, a hospital tent where children are born and soldiers are operated on by a Western doctor.

"The doctor is a strange woman with powerful green eyes," the driver said simply, unassumingly. He concentrated on the road, agilely swerving around numerous two-foot-deep bomb blast craters. "The local oracle says she is friendly with ghosts."

"Fine. Maybe we can do a quick interview," Jethro replied, looking out the window to see if the light was good for photos.

When they arrived, they parked in front of the village's white hospital tent. The 1000-square-foot structure bore a huge, painted red X on its roof to protect it from air raids. Dr. Zoe Bach was inside, working in bloodstained scrubs and delivering a baby. It was her third one that week. But this was a good week, she thought. Each baby and mother had survived so far—better than last week. Much better.

Above her, a rickety lamp tied to the ceiling of the tent swung gently back and forth. The wind outside was perpetually seeping in, moving the light and casting dancing shadows on the operating table. The Kashmiri nurses struggled to keep the tent as airtight and dust-free as possible for surgeries. The floor was dirt, but Zoe's few instruments were spotless, a condition she always insisted on. She called for the scalpel and severed the newborn's umbilical cord in one swift, expert moment. With blood everywhere, she handed off the wailing infant to a nurse, who then began cleaning the healthy child.

After taking some pictures of the bombed village and its school, Jethro Knights ducked his head into the hospital tent. The hanging lamp inside swayed wide; the sun's rays and wind following him in. Zoe noticed the strong draft and thought, What the hell? When she turned, however, Jethro's luminous blue eyes met hers, and she felt stunned to be looking at a light-skinned man only a few years younger than she. The tingling on the back of Zoe's neck told her he was neither handsome nor ugly, but intensely compelling. She felt aroused, and unconsciously adjusted her legs. There was a spiritual and nebulous connection she felt as well, but it was too much for her to immediately fathom.

Jethro answered her surprise with a masculine smile and a slight nod.

An irritated nurse quickly pointed for Jethro to wait outside the tent, to give the patients privacy and to keep the wind out. Half an hour later, Zoe appeared, escorting the wheelchair-bound mother and her newborn out of the hospital tent to her waiting family. In Urdu, Zoe instructed the mother to come back the following morning for a checkup. A minute later Zoe returned and invited Jethro into the tent.

"Greetings to a stranger. We don't get many this far along the Line of Control. *S'il vous plait, Francais*—or do you speak English?" she asked, pulling the surgeon's cap off her head and shaking her hair freely.

"*Je parle deux. Mon nom est Jethro Knights.* It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance too," she said, delighted. "What brings you out here? Though the camera on your neck and the *International Geographic* hat give you away."

Jethro, grinning, shrugged his wide shoulders, and Zoe thought it strange that she noticed his strong, straight teeth.

“I’m a journalist researching a story on refugees.”

“Well, how can I be of service? I like your magazine.”

“Do you have some free time for a short interview? Maybe a walk through the village?”

“Sure, you have great timing. I’m finished here for the day unless something else comes in. I just have to help clean up. Give me ten minutes.”

They walked all afternoon, both of them quickly forgetting the article he was working on. Instead, they swapped stories of their adventures in Kashmir and the other places they had traveled. They even touched on their personal commitments and beliefs toward transhumanism. Each thought it unnerving how much they shared in common, how many similar ideas they had, how many similar places they had visited, how many similar books they had read and planned to read. Even their unspoken thoughts and desires seemed to wrap themselves around each other.

Chemistry, amongst the dust and destruction, mushroomed. Less than five minutes into their walk, Jethro Knights knew he wasn’t leaving on a flight that evening.

## Chapter 8

Two years after the Transhumanism Town Hall Forum, a giant photo of Reverend Belinas appeared on the front page of the *USA Daily Tribune*. In bold, black letters, the headline declared him “Man of the Year.” The picture was a classic of the preacher: his 6-foot-3-inch frame towering over a church pulpit, his right arm raised and pointing towards some distant horizon, cautioning yet guiding at the same moment.

The newspaper’s caption underneath his photo ran:

*Reverend Belinas is a saint to his burgeoning international congregation and has all the makings of a great religious leader in a broken-down world. He considers the transhuman movement and their advocacy of human enhancement technology the greatest threat of our time. Can he stop it?*

That same day of the “Man of the Year” announcement, at a luncheon in southern Missouri with a group of welfare-supported single mothers who were marginalized by their communities and circumstances, Belinas preached that he was fighting for a self-declared spiritual purity that would spread across the land. He wanted it to be the kind that didn’t marginalize anyone. In the bleak economic times facing America, especially in the Bible Belt of the continent, he found a willing group of listeners, most of whom were financially devastated and barely subsisting day to day. Thousands joined his movement every week. Millions more supported his evangelism and considered him with awe.

Unlike other famous religious leaders, Belinas never asked the poor for donations. His disdain for money was legendary. He was essentially without possessions—and made sure everyone knew it. He encouraged others to not just believe in Jesus Christ, but to literally live like him too. Year after year, Belinas never splurged on fancy living, nor entertained women in inappropriate ways, nor even handled a single dollar bill. His followers, friends, and admirers provided for everything. His reputation was so commanding that a meal or a service hadn’t been charged of him in years. His personality and sonorous voice, always in the didactic tone of a sermon, was compensation enough.

Behind him, though, hidden from the public—and carefully monitored by carefully chosen people—was an enormous machine, worth hundreds of millions of dollars. It was supported by a

wealthy few, feeding endless money into the machine for the right to belong to it. They were people for whom riches came too easily and freely: celebrities, royalty, and heirs. They bought Belinas' goodwill and paved the way for his ministry with their resources. In return, he promised them God's favor, both in this world and the next. He meant it, and they believed it.

Belinas was an authentic man, singular in his absolute faith and servitude to the Lord and to his people. Faith was the cornerstone of his religiosity. If God demanded he fly a fully fueled commercial jetliner into a skyscraper filled with thousands of people, he would do it. And not think twice about it. Despite his radicalism, he considered himself broadminded and mostly did not care what religion people were, as long as they actively pursued God in their daily lives, helped the poor, shunned wealth, and avoided transhuman-inspired technology—what he deemed the science of the devil. He professed to be a Christian, but welcomed coexistence and peaceful worship with Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Catholics, Jews, and anyone who believed in God or a higher divine power. Belinas' mission was simple. Unbridled materialism and technology were the domain of his enemies: the atheists and anti-theists. Give it all up and get back to almighty God, he preached—and to helping the faithful, the downtrodden, and the destitute.

To meet him was to meet a devoted monk, or an aesthete at the banks of the Ganges, or an indefatigable holy man. Every day, he wore only leather sandals and a bleached religious gown, creating an angelic warriorlike presence. Purple and gold stripes were embroidered on his robe's white sleeves, showing his leadership status according to his interpretation of the Bible's Old Testament. He shaved first thing every morning and scrubbed his bare scalp raw every day. He was known to pray silently for hours straight. No one ever saw him sweat, or lose his temper, or complain about hunger or cold; he appeared impervious to such frivolities. He was a fanatic without appearing fanatical. His sole flaw—that which only proved he was endearingly human, chimed his followers—was his inclination to enjoy a cigarette. Still, he rarely touched one.

Belinas traveled around in a trio of bulletproof white Range Rovers, driven by thickset bodyguards, who were dressed identically in night-black suits and also carried handguns. Because of Belinas' rock-star status, the top members and financial backers of his congregation insisted he travel that way for his safety. The preacher disliked security, and especially disliked cars. He would've preferred to walk everywhere. And sometimes did—once even a hundred miles across the desert to visit and comfort a child dying from leukemia—just to make a point. When friends and congregation members invited him to stay the night in their homes, he sometimes refused their guestrooms and slept on their couches or floors, or bypassed sleep altogether in order to pray. Humility in front of the Lord and his people was critical, he preached.

Yet more critical was his carefully constructed public image. He made sure the media saw and photographed everything in his ministry. His disdain for technology was no reason *not* to use it. He made sure his life was like a hit television show: the anointed wandering the wasteland, always on the move to preach the Word of God, to stave off evil, to help his flock spread the goodwill of Christianity. He joined in building houses for the homeless. In walking abused dogs from the pound. In handing out food to street children. In donating blood. In planting trees. In mentoring the disabled. In carrying the caskets of the dead. In leading demonstrations against transhumanists and their enterprises. His show was never-ending, always on local television channels even barbershops could air. Or on public radio broadcasts at gas stations. Or on inner city kids' cell phones as webcasts from his church's website. He was everywhere. His own film and production crew—always tagging along behind him—were some of the most talented media personnel in the country. And the best paid.

Belinas was a master diplomat, hungry for power that best accomplished his bidding for his church and the Lord. He would stop at nothing to achieve it. If he had any qualms about his unorthodox methods, which included inciting violence against transhumanists, then they were lost after his recent read of a groundbreaking essay. One of his assistants printed it out from the Internet, telling him it was increasingly getting attention in transhumanist circles. It was Jethro Knights' *Rise of the Transhuman*

*Citizen.*

Dismay filled Belinas after he finished evaluating it. It was not the explosive fuel he wanted the transhumanists to embrace. So far they were an undersized group of soft-spoken intellectuals, mostly aged nerds trying to gently reshape their world, even if they *were* the smartest people on the planet. Defeating them on nearly every issue was rarely a problem. Their chivalry and sense of embedded social decency was their downfall.

On the other hand, this essay and its philosophy, TEF, demanded the transhuman political formula change. It said politics, diplomacy, and egalitarian morals had little to do with the movement. The real aims of transhumanism and its coming new breed of fierce advocates, the omnipotenders, were beyond a sense of good and evil. Beyond a sense of democracy and honor. There was no right and wrong when it came to dying or not dying. There was only success or failure. It spoke of using whatever means necessary to accomplish those aims, of thinking and acting with the same cold clarity a super-intelligent machine would use—something they were quickly evolving into anyway, the essay asserted. The world and every one of its inhabitants were not worth living or dying for. The omnipotender should not be concerned with preserving anything outside a useful transhuman universe.

Belinas winced, letting the paper drop out of his fingers to the floor. He was deeply disturbed, whispering to himself, “God help us if this man and his ideas ever get their way.”

Later, Belinas scribbled the name Jethro Knights into a journal that contained a list of the most dangerous transhumanists. On the list, a third of the people were already crossed off—all murdered in the past eighteen months by covert Redeem Church terrorist attacks.

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“I believe in dying,” Zoe Bach announced matter-of-factly to Jethro Knights. “I believe dying is perfectly okay. Now, do you still want to be with me?”

The entwined couple were lying naked in bed in Zoe’s Kashmiri mud shack. Beside them a candle burned on a tall, unstable stack of medical texts, novels, and poetry chapbooks. In a corner of the room were Jethro’s backpack and all his camera equipment. Four passionate weeks had passed since Jethro stuck his head into the Kundara hospital tent. As usual, they were continuing an unfinished conversation from days ago.

“Maybe, Zoe. But I need a reasonable answer from you for why you think dying is okay.”

“Why do I need a reason?”

“Do I really have to answer that?” Jethro started to tickle and to pinch her.

She squirmed away, saying, “All right, fine. But as I seem to tell you every day, a person doesn’t always need a reason to be reasonable. My mother always said: ‘Reasons often precede the notion of reasoning altogether.’”

“Yes, yes, I know.” He frowned, cupping her breast with his hand. “You’ve told me that plenty of times; however, since the man you’re in bed with only understands reasonable reasons, please answer me rationally so I can also understand your answer.”

Zoe smiled, eager to make headway with him.

“Like I’ve told you before, I don’t think life and death are fundamentally separate phenomena. I’ve seen at least a hundred people die in front of me—the ones I couldn’t save. And in their eyes, always right at the end—the very end—something happens. Something magical. Something enduring. Something graceful. Like they’re going somewhere, or they see something. I don’t think it’s over, whatever it is that happens.”

Jethro released her breast and pushed himself away, rolling onto his back. For such an intelligent person, sometimes she was unbelievable, he thought.

“When they die I’ve seen things you wouldn’t believe,” Zoe continued. “Their faces light up. Their pupils increase in size. Their deaths last a minute or two. It’s not like in the movies, where it’s only a few seconds. The mind straddles the edge of consciousness and wherever else it’s going. Sometimes people die, and come back, then die again. And afterward, the EKG may say that a brain is dead, but there’s still electrical activity going on inside it. There are still flare-ups and minuscule reads, even with the patients in cryonics suspension tanks.

“You can’t prove any of that in a meaningful scientific way. We’ve gone over this a half dozen times.”

“I feel I can,” insisted Zoe. “The brain reads a technical flatline, but that doesn’t mean there’s no activity, that the mind has just disappeared forever. There’s always activity. Something is still present. Sometimes it’s just so small, it’s barely noticeable. At the medical center at San Aliza, eight people I cared for requested to be preserved cryonically as their health deteriorated and their deaths neared. So when they died, I took them down to the basement and preformed the cryo-freezing procedure. Each one of their tests in the tanks has shown—even with some of the bodies being dead for over a year—that the brain matter is still illuminated.”

“Not illuminated. Just typical subatomic particles going about their business in a dead, preserved organism. It’s entropy, regardless of how you try to paint it for yourself.”

“No, it’s evolution. And there’s far more to it with the magnificent potential and complexity of the human brain, especially when it’s frozen properly. But even in bodies that are cremated, there’s still something that lingers. Infrared radar tests prove it. It’s in the air. It’s in the energy. I’ve seen it. Entropy is just a facet of universal evolution. All matter is undergoing activity and communications, regardless of how rudimentary. And somehow, this matter remains organized—imprinted with the possibilities of itself.”

“Oh, no. Now you’re heading to that metaphysical Zen stuff.”

“Yes, exactly,” Zoe said excitedly. “Though I prefer to call it quantum—the mystical motor of all things. I believe that all matter has undetermined tendencies and infinite possibilities, even if they appear to follow prescribed scientific patterns, like our brains are doing right now. It’s quantum dynamics, perpetually unraveling. This conversation. That bullet I removed today from the soldier’s lower cortex. The potholes in the road. The river we swam in yesterday. It’s all filled with a countless amount of possibilities. Everything is swimming in a cosmic quantum Zen.”

“Sure, it’s happening to everything,” answered Jethro. “I know the physics too. The variations of string theory. The so-called God particle. The Eastern epistemological conjectures. You can call it whatever you want. But if it’s not sentient like I am right now, then what use is it? Especially to me, Jethro Knights, the transhumanist. I’m interested in how to create the strongest and most advanced ‘I’ that I’m capable of in my universe. That means my will, my memories, my value system, my emotions, my creativity, my reasoning—my consciousness—all fusing together through a prism of sapient action that makes a conversation like this possible and worthwhile. That’s what I want. Everything else is just inanimate. Just space-taking furniture. Just fairy tales in our mind because we don’t want to face the truth that someday we’re going to die and disappear, and all will be for naught. We all think that. All of us *know* that. Just some of us believe we’re too important to allow that to happen.”

“Oh, you’re a stubborn one,” Zoe responded, looking at him foully. “That wonderful brain of yours is getting in the way of that even more wonderful spirit of yours. You ought to try balancing them more. Why is that ‘I’ so important? Why can’t you just drift peacefully through the universe with the knowledge you aren’t that same ‘I’ anymore?”

“Because that conscious ‘I’ is integral to my life—and also because you used the word ‘knowledge’ in that last sentence, Zoe. How can there be knowledge without something conscious and organized to conceive of it? That part of ourselves always needs to be retained and safeguarded to let us know that life and existence are happening.”

“But it’s all happening in one way or the other, whether you know it or not.”

“Possibly, but I don't give a damn about any part I don't know about. The unconscious quantum world is death to me. I choose not to see it because it's not worth seeing.”

“Because you're spiritually blind, baby.”

“That may be true; however, I still feel and believe the same.”

“Give it time, my fledgling omnipotender,” Zoe said with a dash of mockery. “You'll see things differently. Besides, if you're going to be all-powerful, then you're destined to master the quantum sovereignty of the universe. One day you'll have to be able to feel and to control it; you'll have to be able to form and to create with it; you'll have to be able to manifest and to merge with it. Whether its nanotechnology, string theory physics, or just the creative thoughts in your mind, you'll have to rule with quantum dominance. Call it ‘spiritual transhumanism’ if it's easier to swallow. Your understanding and oneness with quantum will be the greatest of your powers—or the demise of all your dreams.”

Jethro shut his eyes in frustration. What did she know about the omnipotender and his dreams, he asked himself? But she nudged closer and overcame his displeasure, her body warming him, like the sun does to a reptile. He noticed it intuitively and pulled her closer. He really couldn't argue with her concepts and logically win, anyway. It was the same thing as arguing about the existence of God. No one really knew for sure. At least not until science advanced more. Regardless, people chose their sides.

“Your answer, cowboy?” she said coyly.

“Okay, fine. I'll say it: I still want to be with you even if you believe in dying and think it's okay.”

“Wow, you must be really smitten with me. The man whose most important goal in life is to achieve immortality has fallen in love with someone who doesn't believe there's a need to do that.”

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Gregory Michaelson's and Amanda Kenzington's 500-person glam wedding was set for early July, at the five-star Belidore, the fanciest hotel in Boston. Only four weeks before, Gregory had graduated from law school. Knowing the money into which he was marrying, he bypassed numerous job offers, including one from the wealthiest law firm in the country, Sillovan & Franklin in New York City. Instead, Gregory accepted an unknown public defender's job in the small county seat of Queensbury, Upstate New York, telling friends he wanted to help people. The “little people” he joked to Amanda—the people about whom he had never cared nor considered his entire life, but found them useful to consider and to care about now just for the sake that others might consider and care about him. Such was the future career he was aiming for: politics.

Amanda's father bought them a lavish colonial-style house in the only gated community in Queensbury. They joined the nearby country club and made generous donations to local schools and charities. Amanda was pregnant a few months after the wedding and left her Master's degree unfinished.

Her father told her, “You found a good husband. Wasn't that why you went to grad school in Boston? What do you want with tests and classes anymore? You're never going to work, my precious. You're going to preside over things.”

She agreed with daddy. She always did. As long as she stuck with him and followed his advice, she'd always be in good hands. More than once did she fantasize about marrying her father if she could have. Her husband, on the other hand, she doubted. He needed to prove himself. Political meandering, lawyering, and all the parties she attended with Gregory were fun and amusing; however, her kind of people—the uberwealthy—saw government and the administration of law as just a game. Real power came exclusively from money, most often to the highest bidder. Her prenuptial agreement with Gregory was ironclad; her father spent a small fortune on a legal team to craft it.

In the first weeks of his job as a public defender, Gregory found his new role strangely

intoxicating. Mostly, this was because his days seemed schizophrenic. On one hand, he was protecting some of the poorest people in his home state; on the other hand, he now belonged to the wealthiest faction of people in America. He found it both perplexing and amusing to sit across from a criminal who would spend three years incarcerated for stealing a beat-up, six-hundred-dollar station wagon. He liked to secretly think to himself: I'm worth about ten million times more than this poor, dumb bastard. But Gregory never actually acted like that at work or in public. He always pretended to take every person seriously, regardless of their circumstances—even with his close friends. In fact, he played the good-guy role to everyone but his wife.

Gregory was a great showman. It was the core and most sharpened part of his personality. Criminals went away trusting him. He came away feeling cleansed for helping the little people. One day, Gregory asked his wife if she thought he was despicable for feeling and thinking such things. She looked at him like he was an idiot.

“Why even spend time worrying about it, Greg?” she muttered. Amanda sat in front of a six-foot-tall Victorian mirror, meticulously putting on eye shadow in preparation for a dinner party—their third one that week.

Despite some initial excitement at his new job—contending with larceny, domestic violence, and drug bust cases—Gregory tired of his work after only a few months. Living deep inland now, he longed for the ocean. He missed the yacht club, sunset cocktails with his friends, and sailing *Blue Lagoon*. Sometimes, when he daydreamt of yacht racing, he thought of Jethro Knights. Jethro out there on the other side of the planet—the intrepid philosopher-explorer. Gregory couldn't help but feel jealous. Stinging him even more was the recent news from an old Victoria classmate: Jethro was now a journalist at *International Geographic*, writing travel stories from his boat and covering a conflict in Asia as a war correspondent. What an adventure, he reluctantly admitted.

Gregory searched for Jethro online and found a dozen of his articles. The lawyer read a few of them and told himself the writing and photography were mediocre. The same night at a convenience store, Gregory saw the latest *International Geographic* issue on a magazine rack. On page twenty-two, he read another of Jethro's stories, a piece about hitchhiking through the Srinagar Valley with a detachment of army tanks. A photo showed that instead of camera equipment, Jethro was carrying a backpack filled with fifty kilos of rice for the starving Kashmiri Pandits, whose fields were too mired in landmines to safely farm anymore. It made Gregory's domestic life as a lawyer in Queensbury seem meager.

Gregory often ended his thoughts about Jethro with plans of the mega-yacht he was going to buy when he moved back to the coast. The attorney daydreamed about finding Jethro on the high seas and sailing circles around him with his sleek new 100-foot vessel. Then Jethro's hand-built teacup would be foolish and inept—a rusty tin can fit for a poor boy who didn't have what it takes to make it in law or politics.

Like all superficial showmen, Gregory lived inside of others' opinions and never considered what it would be like outside of them. His feelings emanated not from himself, but from blockbuster Hollywood movies; from his friends' choices in cars; from dramatic courtroom pictures in popular glitzy magazines; from his church's manipulative version of sin; from his mother-in-law's taxing Epicurean style; from the demanding professional expectations his father held for him; from his wife's nagging reproach about whether he was good enough or not; and, of course, from Jethro Knights' refusal to offer him any respect.

## Chapter 9

Jethro Knights and Zoe Bach were sitting in the shade on rusty foldup chairs outside the Kundara

hospital tent. He was wearing ripped jeans and a black T-shirt, clutching his worn journal in his hands. She was wearing light blue scrubs spotted in blood, the result of a successful operation on an Indian soldier who had arrived earlier that morning with life-threatening shrapnel wounds.

Zoe turned to Jethro and asked, "Aren't you worried you'll miss something if you don't die? Something possibly amazing? You—the explorer who sails the world, and reads everything he can, and wants to leave no stone unturned?"

"I doubt there's anything there, afterward," answered Jethro. "Otherwise, it would hardly be worth it to call myself a transhumanist."

"Dying and being a transhumanist have much more in common than you realize," Zoe answered sharply. "Death is the ultimate arbiter of life, a perfect expression of the soul of the universe. Perhaps death is even the ultimate journey for the transhumanist to undergo. Accepting death and where it leads has nothing to do with *not* being a transhumanist."

Jethro sighed. "You know Zoe, I don't really understand your issue with death. You seem obsessed with it."

She looked at him, shocked.

"My issue? Are you being funny? Look in the mirror sometime."

"But you're obsessed with what it might do for you."

"And you're obsessed with what it might *not* do for you."

"Yeah, well that sounds far more reasonable since we're actually living on the *life* side of the death issue."

"Jethro, that's just what your mind tells you to think. We might be stuck in some vortex where we've already died, and are reliving our lives in a nanosecond in some laboratory vat. Or more likely, a parallel universe where our greater minds have recreated all these realities using unknown quantum technology. Or maybe we're just controlled experiments of super-intelligent aliens from one of the hundred billion galaxies in our universe that contain planets capable of supporting life. Or possibly we're just dreaming and still asleep in bed. And one morning we're going to wake up and be late for our job flipping hamburgers, or maybe running a country as its president. Or maybe fighting as a soldier in Kashmir."

Zoe stared at him, wondering if she was making any impact. "You've said it yourself—if we reach immortality in the future, and we're a million years older than we think, and a million years more evolved, then why can't all these things take place? They probably have. And it would be wise then to die, to meet our greater self, our larger destiny. To meet each other again, in more amazing forms. If that's the case, then why don't we just speed up the process and kill ourselves? Or at least cryo-preserve ourselves right now? Though I think the suicide option is the most romantic," she said, her lips forming a deliberate smirk.

"Now you're really scaring me."

"And your naivete scares me," Zoe fired back.

"I'm not saying you're wrong; however, I've told you again and again about the Transhumanist Wager. For me, it's the only reasonable choice to make and to follow in life. There's nothing else that makes sense."

"Ugh. Not that again."

"Yes, that again. What's there not to agree with?" asked Jethro. "The Wager is the most logical conclusion to arrive at for any sensible human being: We love life and therefore want to live as long as possible—we desire to be immortal. It's impossible to know if we're going to be immortal once we die. To do nothing doesn't help our odds of attaining immortality, since it seems evident that we're going to die someday and possibly cease to exist. To attempt something scientifically constructive towards ensuring immortality beforehand is the most logical solution."

"I've told you already—it's not that I disagree. The logic is fine. It's that I just don't like it that way. Do you understand? I just don't like it. It doesn't *feel* like me. And what I like and feel is more

important than being logical or sensible about something.”

“Come on. That’s the biggest cop-out ever. That’s what religious people say; that’s what the Christians, the Hindus, and the Muslims say. It’s the same blind argument as their leap-of-faith positions. They want you to dedicate your life and subjugate your reasoning to some mentally ill carpenter that lived two thousand years ago. Or to some blue-skinned deity with four arms. Or to the teachings of some suicide-prone warlord with twelve wives. All because they like it and it *feels* right to them. Their beliefs are absurd, completely lacking sound judgment.”

“It’s an acceptable position, Jethro, even if they’re fools. It’s their right to think and feel that way. And it’s your right to think and feel otherwise. There’s no right or wrong here.”

“Yet, when they found out you helped cryo-freeze some of your atheist patients at San Aliza, evangelical Jesus freaks threatened to kill you and keyed your car. Is that their right?”

“Philosophically, yes; legally, no. That’s what the government and its various institutions—like the judicial system and law enforcement—exist for: to keep all parties protected.”

“But Zoe, they’re often not doing that. These vacuous institutions, and the individuals or oligarchies that run them, mostly just protect their own interests; specifically, their conservative likes or dislikes. And they usually do so blindly and stupidly, led by irrational feelings and erroneous ideas, especially if they’re religious—which is just about all of them. How people and institutions act based on their likes or dislikes—when it’s stupid and irrational, when it’s biased by heritage and cultural positions, when it’s steered by centuries-old religious tenets, when it’s so obviously anti-progress—should not be tolerated anymore. This is the twenty-first century. Not only is it dangerous in a world with suitcase-sized dirty bombs, anthrax-laced postal letters, and 25,000 armed nuclear missiles pointed in every direction, but it’s also very wasteful of our potential on this planet.”

“I understand where you’re coming from, Jethro. But that’s not realistic in our world. Not with so many nations, governments, institutions, cultures, viewpoints, faiths, and especially, individual egos around the globe, all clumsily tangled together and in constant conflict.”

“The conflict stems from people’s ignorance and the cowardice to overcome that ignorance.”

“I’m not sure about that. It could simply come from their indifference, a general nonchalance about achieving something better or more significant in their lives. Not everyone can exist as functionally, rationally, and as strongly as you can, dedicating their existence to a logical conclusion like aspiring to immortality because they love life. Not everyone wants the best and highest in themselves, Jethro. Not everyone should.”

“Think about what you’re saying. That’s insane if people don’t want to live for the best and highest in themselves. Yet more importantly, what then? What’s their wager in life? What’s their motive for living? What are most people on Earth even doing other than goddamn consuming, polluting, and overbreeding? Should they really have the right to be stupid, irrational, wasteful, destructive, and backwards? Pulling down the world—my world—with them?”

“Yes, if that’s their destiny,” Zoe replied, almost blasé about it. “If that’s what they like or dislike. If that’s what they feel like doing. And if they have the power and initiative to do so. But I don’t think they will sink our world—*your* world. At least not too much. Because people like you will do something about it.”

Jethro shook his head, frustrated. She simply refused to make a stand, even when her own safety and existence were concerned.

Zoe pulled her rusty chair across the dirt to be closer to him. She was almost grinning. “Don’t worry, baby. Everything will work out in the universe, one way or the other. You’ll see. There’s a beautiful plan already in the works. A magnificent cosmic wager not yet understood. Whether you acknowledge it or not. Whether you like it or not.”

Jethro turned away from her. How could someone be so irrationally optimistic, he thought? Is she toying with me? With herself? She’s taken her art of positive thinking way too far. Her infallible belief in universal quantum mechanics—with a dash of Zen—was enmeshed in her core psyche. It was

indispensable to her; it bridged gaps in reason whenever they were expedient.

“You’re killing me,” he said.

“Not as much as I will one day.”

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. Zoe watched the afternoon sun shower rays over Kundara. Jethro let her premonition pass without discussion. It was just like her to throw in a clairvoyant Zen bomb right as the conversation was nearing a tense close.

“You know I partially agree, or at least I technically defer to some of what you’re saying,” he said finally. “I do believe in people’s rights and actions if there’s power behind it. But that bears a perilous promise. Because if so it goes for the world, then, definitely, so it goes for the transhumanists. Eventually, we will win. The smarter and more powerful entity will triumph over others, whether they like it or not.”

“Sure,” she said, with smugness. “At least for the time being. But my deeper point is that all the wagers, rights, likes, dislikes, and feelings of the world are determined by a plethora of possibilities, any of which might happen, can happen, and probably *should* happen. And formulas along the way that people devise for guidance and action—like yours—can easily fail. There may be an anomaly or a black swan that no one saw coming, that no calculation foresaw or computed, regardless of how logical or proven everything seemed.”

He threw up his arms. “You’re making this utterly difficult.”

“Baby, I just don’t think you’re accounting for the universe being spectacular enough. It’s far more elaborate than you give it credit for. I’m in love with transhumanism too—just not in the inflexible, hard-nosed way you are.”

He gave up. There was no point in discussing it any longer. Besides, she was right in her own crazy way. There was no arguing against her. She could prevail in the short term by remote default. She could prevail in the long term by remote default. There were exceptions to nearly all rules. Especially, when not all the rules appeared logical. Some people, like Zoe Bach, managed to live their whole lives under special stars, feeling their way through the universe’s jagged disparity, prospering despite unfavorable odds.

But living that way wasn’t practical or rational, at least not to Jethro. The landmine click sounded in his head.

Jethro believed life took place in a statistically relevant and consequential universe. And it was no place for blind optimism when you were sure to die someday. It was no place for allowing stupidity and irrationality when you had one shot to live forever. The battle was on for his existence. That’s where he was. Growling.

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The following month, Jethro Knights and Zoe Bach embarked on a three-day trek in a remote part of the Kashmiri Himalayas, an ascent of Tultican Peak. They chose the hike because they would be far away from the war. En route were only peaceful Buddhist villages and remote monasteries. They even went without a guide. Jethro carried an external frame backpack with supplies and food. Zoe carried the tent and water.

After spending the night near an ancient Jain temple, Jethro and Zoe continued towards Tultican Peak the following morning. Even though the summer air was chilly 13,000 feet up in the mountains, snow from nearby glaciers was still melting. The trail became muddy and treacherous as it followed thousand-foot cliffs, steeply winding its way towards the top, where a legendary Himalayan vantage point awaited. Jethro, who let Zoe lead so he could watch her closely, soon insisted she tie to him with a fifteen-foot rope, in case one of them fell. He became progressively more worried about her as the

hours passed. She wasn't careless in her hiking, but the terrain demanded a healthy dose of caution. She possessed none, tromping on wobbly rocks and occasionally slipping in the mud. Once, she barely caught herself before stumbling over a sheer drop-off. Out here, Jethro thought, one wrong step and it's sure death. There would be no chance of survival. Even getting to a fallen body could prove impossible.

The couple spoke little during the long day of hiking. Jethro purposely avoided conversation. Twice she tried to make him divulge his feelings about their relationship, when they stopped for a drink on the path. Jethro was not prepared to do that yet. His heart was a puzzle. The conflict in him, between her Zenlike acceptance of the universe and his aggressive, egocentric views on transhumanism, was growing. A dangerous tempest was gathering in their future. He knew it. She knew it. Zoe wanted to rip him apart and help him find peace, wanted to show him there was no conflict and never could be. There was just their love. And fate. Jethro disagreed.

Near sundown, exhausted, they camped alongside a cliff. Jethro held Zoe tightly throughout the entire night. Four feet away the mountain dropped off sharply. Even going to the bathroom was dangerous. In the morning they cooked a small breakfast and packed up. After three hours of walking, they reached the small Hindu shrine atop Tultican Peak. Jethro sat down cross-legged near the edge of a rock face, looking like a Buddhist monk, absorbing the panoramic vista. Miles below them, an alpine forest merged into the lush agrarian-dominated Srinagar Valley. The war and its constant shelling were far away now. They were nearly 20,000 feet up in the sky. It felt like the tip of the world. Except for K2, all other mountains in sight were below them.

He was glad to be finished hiking for now. The mood between them was dour. And watching Zoe on that cliff was nerve-wracking. He sat, trying to soak in the peaceful spectacle of nature, his safety rope still attached to her.

Zoe stood directly behind him for a long time, carefully watching him, observing the locks of his shaggy blond hair. Her eyebrows were slanted inward. She imagined what his thoughts were—and she was right.

"Why are you so afraid, Jethro?" Zoe asked.

She paused when he looked back at her, frowning.

"Ugh. Okay, my mistake. I'll rephrase that. Because I know you don't really feel fear. You would never grant the universe so much sway over you. So why are you so worried, Jethro?"

"Because I don't want you to fall or get hurt."

"Or yourself," she insisted.

"Of course, that too. But I'm not worried about myself right now. I have all the power over myself that I need."

She stared at him, her pupils edgy. "Of course. That's it: power over yourself. Classic. It's so hard for you to be in love, baby. Always trying to control and retain that power. But when someone else is in the picture, wow, does it change—and change quickly."

Jethro continued looking forward and whispered, "Yes, it certainly does. It's shocking me too. This awareness of someone else. And, the inevitable question: What to do about it?"

Zoe felt an urgent need to get through to him now that he was talking. She walked rapidly to the edge of the cliff, so that her toes were almost hanging over it.

"Are you going to be able to do it, Jethro Knights?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" he answered, trying to keep calm, watching her at the edge of a 5,000-foot precipice, irate she was testing him again. He was grateful she was still attached to him by the rope; however, there was no guarantee that he could hold her in the slippery mud near the cliff if she went over.

"You know exactly what I mean. This is excruciating for you. People don't fight love or existence like you do. Are you going to keep me in your life? Or am I too much for you, the lone transhumanist wolf?"

“I don’t know,” he answered quietly, a sharp wind almost drowning out his words. “I want you in my life. Of course, you know I...I have feelings for you.” He almost said it: I love you. But not yet, he told himself. Not yet. Because then it would all be over for him. Right now, he might still be able to escape and justify his romance with her as experience—just a pivotal new adventure. The most amazing one.

Jethro glanced tensely at the faraway mountains and said, “I just don’t know if I can live my life as a transhumanist and also be with you. The two worlds clash, and merging them may be impossible. I might be too selfish for love.”

“Selfish is the wrong damn word. You may be too hardheaded.”

“That too. But damn it, Zoe, can you step back from the cliff now? You’re doing this purposely,” Jethro said finally, angrily.

Instead of backing away, Zoe nudged forward, her toes now perilously over the edge. She had only moved five inches, but the energy in the air changed instantly, dramatically. Both of them knew it.

Jethro jumped up and shouted, “What the hell are you doing?”

The six feet between them felt endless. Everything around them turned colder, almost icy. The brightness in the sky disappeared from cloud cover.

“I’m about to teach you a lesson in life—and on love.”

Jethro knew immediately what she was doing: jumping. Suicide for her was just a birth. A form of quantum evolution. And she meant it. This whole damn time, she meant it.

“Zoe, don’t do it. Please back away.”

“Do you know how often I think about this?”

He didn’t care. He glanced to see if there was ledge or something below her. There wasn’t.

“No I don’t—and right now I don’t want to. I just need you to back away.”

Jethro began subtly pulling in the rope attached to her. She wasn’t going too far, as long as he could keep his balance on the cliff’s edge and not slide over himself. He calculated whether or not he could. He wasn’t sure because the mud was tricky.

“I think about it often enough. It’s not just my job that makes me like this. It’s what I believe. It comes in my dreams. In my patients’ last moments. In your eyes when we’re making love. In my every breath.”

Zoe saw Jethro pulling in the rope—and smiled. With the accuracy of a surgeon’s hand, in one swift motion she quickly unclipped herself and let the rope fall. It hit the ground underneath her with a thud, and toppled off the edge.

Jethro’s fury turned to disbelief. “Zoe, come on now? We can talk this out.”

“We’ve talked enough,” she shouted at him. “A hundred times by now, wouldn’t you say?”

“What do you want me to do? What *can* I do?”

“To have the faith to jump with me—to believe it’s okay.”

“That’s insane.”

“It’s not insane. Or it’s as insane as everything else in this world. I want you to believe it’s okay.”

“But I do believe it’s okay. In fact, I’m convinced it would be amazing. You know that. A true peak experience. But also quite stupid. Very, very stupid.”

“Well, at least you’ve gotten that far.”

“I’m farther along than you think. Perhaps farther than you. But this is not my path.”

“And not keeping me in your life because of obstinate transhumanist ideals *is* your path? How childish and stupid!” she cried, wobbling near the edge, tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

“Zoe, I didn’t say that yet. That decision is not made. I’m still trying to get through it, but that one will take time.”

“How much time? It’s an insult to me that you have to get through it when you know how we feel about each other. How amazing and unique and special this is.”

“I’m sorry. It’s not meant to be an insult. You could also look at it as something noble.”

“Noble? And what if jumping here is noble? Since you know I believe I'll only find another version of myself, perhaps an even better one,” she said.

“Zoe, be reasonable.”

But she wasn't able to be reasonable. She wasn't fully there anymore. Tears were cascading down her cheeks, her abundant emotions, faith, and feelings drowning her. She wasn't only speaking to Jethro anymore, but to something deep inside herself.

She drifted towards the edge, already off balance.

“Zoe, please. Not like this.”

“You're being stubborn, my love. Without justification. Just a man afraid of the unknown in his heart. When there's so much more out there to embrace.”

“It's much more complicated than that,” Jethro insisted.

“No it's not. But it doesn't matter anyway. Because I think you'll always save me. Always look for me. I think we made our choice a long time ago. I felt it right when I saw you for the first time. Even if you can't have me now.”

Jethro saw her balance failing and doubted that she could pull herself back anymore.

Zoe tilted over, her body speed gaining momentum in the air, until finally she was falling headfirst, uncontrollably. She didn't flinch, but accepted it serenely, watching him as she began a thousand-foot drop.

Jethro Knight's mind screamed. Instinctively, he took a step—then another, and another—and lunged at her in the mud, his body hitting the ground hard and sliding towards the cliff face. In front of him, his outstretched right hand aimed for any piece of Zoe it could grasp. It reached her swiftly falling upside-down leg, barely, his fingers clamping down on her right ankle with all his strength. Her weight jerked him forward, downward, almost over the edge. He countered with his empty hand, pushing himself up on one knee, and digging his right foot into the cliff. A sharp rock scraped his shin bloody. He swayed, trying to pull her back, starting to lose his balance. His right foot stumbled, skidded in the mud, his boot coming to within an inch of the edge before stopping. He dropped to his butt as her weight began pulling him over the precipice. In the last instant before they were both gone, his left heel pushed vigorously into the mud, digging deep, helping to mobilize his weight, to fortify his stability. Then, with furious strength, he arched his back and neck, grasping out, and yanked her up to the edge in one sweeping motion. They fell to the ground together, his right foot totally hanging over the cliff now. Behind him, his left hand frantically dug for a secure hold in the brown sludge. With his other hand he grabbed Zoe's jeans and dragged her to him.

Then they were still, her body wrapped against his chest. The embracing pair balanced precariously on the edge. Mud was on their faces and clothes.

After many seconds in silence, she looked at him and smiled peacefully.

“See, you saved me,” he heard her whisper.

The words weren't only for him, but to everything else that also surrounded them.

Jethro Knights shook his head slowly. Sweat poured off his brows. He was breathing heavily, and his eyes were red with danger. He pulled Zoe tightly into him, bringing her mouth to his, and kissed her forcefully. Behind her back, his right hand reached for the rope and violently yanked it in. He grabbed the end and quickly clipped her back on to him.

“Let's get on with our journey—we have a long way home,” he ordered. A discordant vibe in the air brimmed from the severity of his voice.

“Of course, my love. But I still don't think you're going to be able to keep me yet, one way or the other.”

It was the moment after spending three months together, after innumerable bouts of making love and talking late into the Kashmiri nights, with bombs hurling and hissing in the distance. After frantic knocks at two in the morning for the doctor who spoke with ghosts, because she was immediately needed in the hospital tent. After scores of road excursions to other villages on scooters. After side trips, trekking in the snowcapped mountains together. And after skinny-dipping in the valley's rivers—that Jethro Knights solemnly confessed to Zoe Bach: I love you.

He was in love with her fiercely incisive mind. Her body that perfectly fit his. Her iron work ethic and competence as a surgeon. Her faith in destiny taking care of itself. Her dark, death-wish soul aspiring for passion and life.

Jethro reeled back in distress at the full realization. Something novel had been seeded inside him during the past few months, and was now budding. It challenged him to his core. He needed to leave. Depart as soon as possible. Get away from her so he could gather his thoughts. The man who prided himself on being rational and unemotional was being crushed by his heart. He was feeling emotions of wanting to protect Zoe to the point of giving his own life for her. He even questioned if he was sailing only to find *her*, and not his immortality or the best path to pursuing transhumanism.

He found himself wondering—practically fantasizing—if immortality was really just gifted through the temple in her belly. Here was a man who never understood love of another and now was completely engulfed by it. His rational mind cried out that it was a trick, a woe that threw him into melancholy, into a battle with his own desires and reason. This was worse than any of the storms, more dangerous than the seventy-foot wave from Hurricane Talupa, more chaotic than the death roll on *Contender*.

Jethro Knights was not afraid of love. His heart and mind were simply without experience, without a map. Because he was neither wounded nor compromised, he was not educated in these matters. Yet, here he was, shocked at the stunning task before him. Spending his life with Zoe Bach, pursuing their bliss. It was such an obvious choice. So natural. You don't meet a loving, wild, adventurous, life-seeking doctor out in a war zone and pass it up. You don't walk away and not support and protect her in any way you can for the rest of your life. Millions of years of biology was speaking to him, was shouting at him, was motivating him. This was the once-in-a-lifetime chance described by so many of the great books he read—their tributes to the altar of love. So many had passionately raved of the irresistible beckoning and unmatched dream.

Despite it all, Jethro forced himself to end the relationship. He forced himself to finish what he wanted to do: sail around the world and discover himself, continue his quest for immortality, and find the direction it should take. He took a week off from staying with Zoe and flew to Tibet to write another *International Geographic* travel article. In those few days he taught himself to shut down his heart. To not pay attention to its yearnings. To still his emotions.

When he returned to Kundara, he embraced her and made love to her for one enduring, sleepless night—then said farewell at dawn.

Leaving Zoe was the most painful experience Jethro had ever endured. The wound smarted, twisted, left him with insomnia, left him unable to eat for days. He lost weight, caught the flu, coughed all night in bed, watched his hair follicles turn gray. Jethro forced himself not to contact her again. He didn't want to keep in touch. He couldn't bear both worlds. Zoe cried, laughed, threatened, and finally screamed at him when she saw him walk off at dawn, carrying his backpack and camera. She marveled at his heart. At his stubborn mind. So ardent, so desiring of knowledge and power, so needing to fathom and control the universe and its mysterious ways.

For the first few days after he left, Zoe felt little more than a phantom, empty and void. She could hardly believe he was gone; that he would really insist on halting their extraordinary path of love. Then, over the next few weeks, she gathered her peace, accepted it, forced herself to believe it was okay, and practiced her quantum thoughts. She chose to deliberately lose herself in her work and focus

on her career. She was leaving Kashmir soon too, back to her residency in San Francisco. The endless hours in the operating room would help get her mind off him.

Besides, deep down inside, she knew he would be back. She could wait. This was just the beginning.

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Jethro Knights arrived in Singapore, his heart concealed in the most cavernous part of his mind. He finished the remaining maintenance on his yacht, and a week later departed through the Straits of Malacca, lightning casting its way across the water in front of him. He was bound for the Indian Ocean.

He reached Sri Lanka in his third year away from New York City, and stopped in Galle to re-provision and research the highlands for an article. There, Jethro had all his mail forwarded to him from the past twelve months. In the small postal box were school loan consolidation offers, alumni donation requests, U.S. Census Bureau questionnaires, chain store coupons, health insurance notifications, driver's license renewal forms, and much more. All system garbage, thought Jethro, who was so far removed from the nine-to-five world with its oppressive tax statements, life insurance premiums, and cable bills.

At the bottom of the package he noticed another letter, slightly crumpled but recently mailed. It bore the insignia of the World Transhumanist Institute. The name of its president, Dr. Preston Langmore, was in the upper left corner. He opened the envelope and read:

*Dear Jethro Knights,*

*I recently had the pleasure of reading your Victoria University senior thesis: Rise of the Transhuman Citizen. In all my readings on the subject of transhumanism, few essays have moved me so much. Your paper reads like the arrival of a revolutionary manifesto—a new planet discovered in a long-established galaxy. The ethics and ideas of TEF and the omnipotender are radical but simple, raw but convincing. They are also, refreshingly, without a hint of remorse.*

*The paper has been getting some notable attention recently—mostly in the underground circles of our movement. Transhumanists have taken over the liberty to post it everywhere on the Internet. I've seen it on a dozen websites and blogs.*

*In light of this, I've been trying to contact you, but have found it quite difficult to do so. Recently, Dean Graybury, whom I've known for years, assisted me. He informed me that you'd built a boat and were sailing around the world—writing articles for International Geographic. He put me in touch with your editor, Francisco Dante, who has given me this address to reach you.*

*If you are the man who wrote Rise of the Transhuman Citizen, please contact me. I am most interested in your welfare and in making use of your eloquent articulation, if in fact you are still interested in transhumanism.*

*Yours truly,*

*Dr. Preston Langmore, President  
World Transhumanist Institute  
478 Fernright Avenue, NW*

Washington, D.C. 20004

Before Jethro departed the following week for the Red Sea, he wrote back to Langmore. Jethro thanked him for the letter and welcomed correspondence with him. Jethro informed him of his travels, his articles, and the books he was reading. He also wrote of his unyielding commitment to his own immortality and the field of transhumanism. He told Langmore that the sailing trip was both a test and a training mission: a time to strengthen his core self so he could successfully accomplish his long-term objectives in life.

Jethro promised to regularly check his personal email when he could. Soon they began corresponding frequently and candidly via the Internet.

One of Jethro's earliest emails to Langmore read:

*Good Morning Preston,*

*Thank you for that transhumanism essay you forwarded three days ago. It was an engaging read. Tomorrow I'm leaving again, headed up the coast of Africa. Just came through bullet-ridden Yemen. Filthy, dangerous, and brutal. It's hard to fathom that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world and that nearly one in four on the planet are now Muslim. Don't people realize the teachings of the Koran are totally incompatible with a free, functional society? Don't people see how male-chauvinistic and xenophobic its ideas are? All the women here are totally covered up in black—I can't even see their eyes. How do they expect to live in a world when half the population can't see or be seen? Just like the Bible and other major religious texts, the pages of the Koran are not remotely suited to instruct humankind.*

*Unfortunately, most of my travels have increasingly led me to feel cross at many cultures, societies, and governments. There's much to scoff at with the human race, much to criticize, much to transform. Honestly, most of it should be scrapped and recast entirely.*

*Nevertheless, some things I do appreciate—at least in small doses. The authenticity of the indigenous peoples of the South Pacific, for example. The honor and efficiency of the few remaining Japanese Samaria clans I visited. The unyielding militants in Kashmir, as misled as they are. Or that magnificent floating community I sailed by near Singapore—where, apparently, they create their own laws. Still, I see mass culture as a formidable enemy. It seems to me, this is the most dangerous thing about people's perspectives on immortality and transhumanism. Culture has been based for centuries on fear and on God or a divine power delivering us from that fear. And not what we can do as a species or as individuals, especially in science and technology.*

*Feel free to send me more of your thoughts and essays.*

*Sincerely,*  
*Jethro*

Langmore emailed back more essays and also related personal anecdotes of his own travels, including the lessons and perspectives he had accumulated along his extensive path of transhumanism. In one email, Langmore sent eight favorite quotes of his youth to Jethro, knowing the young man would appreciate the intensity and wisdom in them:

*1) I'm a skeptic of humankind, but a believer of its potential.*

- 2) *There's one sure way to destroy yourself: by not being honest.*
- 3) *Life is essentially a choice between pursuing personal godhood or dust.*
- 4) *The evolution of humans is long overdue for a major upgrade.*
- 5) *People may not be interested in life extension, but life is interested in extending them.*
- 6) *All levels of society must be subject to the sanctity of the individual.*
- 7) *Transhumanists have a religion; it consists of asking the question, Why?*
- 8) *The soul of a human being is that which wants to survive in life-threatening situation.*

Jethro smiled when he read the quotes, and responded by emailing his own set of gathered imperatives:

*Preston,*

*Here are the meditations I've found essential to me so far—to get what I want out of life. I read and consider them every day. And, on occasion, add to them or even rewrite them.*

*Cheers,  
Jethro*

- 1) *Let my thoughts always utilize statistical analysis of value as the highest means of interpretation possible—then let my actions follow the best, most logical path derived from that information. Form follows function.*
- 2) *Strive to always know and recognize the difference between my rational and emotional self. Slavery to emotions (or anything else) is slavery to the universe—and by its nature, counter to TEF and the omnipotender. Slavery is its own variation of death.*
- 3) *Understand that society's mass culture and its reverence for its history is a dominant adversary—and for me not to give it credence or power. I am not fundamentally one with the Earth, its people, or its multitudes of life; I do not view myself as a beholden spawn or child of the universe. I am alone and distinct.*
- 4) *Understand that any sense of social pride from others or in myself is another formidable detriment—do not let it manifest in any way. Do not respect others who suffer from it.*
- 5) *Understand that I will make mistakes but will accept them humbly, and not justify myself to them; instead, I will learn from them, and will make fewer and fewer mistakes as the years pass.*
- 6) *Adhere to these rules and accomplish my goals by always focusing on long-term growth patterns, outcomes, and evolutions of self-worth and value perception—and not necessarily the immediate moment, which may reveal little of reality or my ultimate destiny.*
- 7) *I must have zero tolerance for betraying my ambitions and quests or I will quickly lose valuable*

*time and headway attaining my best self. In a closed system like Earth's life-and-death cycle, that lost time and potential progress may be irrevocable and unrecoverable. The universe and one's existence can offer no forgiveness for failed opportunity. Always maintaining and applying the utmost integrity in myself and of my philosophy, TEF, is essential.*

*8) An omnipotender doesn't fall in love. I will fail to achieve my goals if I lose myself in another, live for another, or place my happiness and aspirations in another. I am self-sufficient, not needing anything or anyone else.*

After more email exchanges, each letter longer and more personal than the former, Langmore asked Jethro how much he knew about the fifty-year history of transhumanism and its immortality mission—the science, the multi-decade clash with religious America, the highs and lows of the movement. Jethro admitted he didn't know the full details, pointing out that he had never joined any groups in his life, nor bothered to know much about them. Additionally, he told Langmore he was often skeptical of groups—even an organized scientific one such as the World Transhumanist Institute—but that a comprehensive history would be appreciated.

Langmore responded in a curt, all-capital-lettered email:

***NOT A DAMN GROUP, JETHRO, BUT A BUNCH OF OVERACHIEVING SCIENTISTS FED UP WITH MOB MEDIOCRITY AND PIG RULES, WHO DECIDED TO BAND TOGETHER FOR GREATER EFFICACY. ESSENTIAL BOOKS AND MY LECTURES ON THEIR WAY TO YOU—PICK UP NEXT WEEK AT XAVIER HOTEL IN DOWNTOWN CAIRO.***

***REGARDS,  
PRESTON***

Jethro grinned. Langmore's response contained fire, and he liked that. Perhaps there was more to these gentle scientists than he thought. Perhaps they just needed to be ignited.

Seven days later, Jethro docked *Contender* in the Suez Canal, took a bus to Cairo, and collected his three-foot-high wooden box at the Xavier Hotel. In it was every important book written about transhumanism and its foes, and every essential lecture and speech that Langmore had ever made.

The nearly seventy books ranged in titles from Dappleton's *Inquiry into the Ethics of a Conscious Machine*, to Bandon's *The Transhuman Consumer*, to Kilton's *A Complete History of Human Enhancement*, to Fitzgerald's *The Coming of the Great Singularity*, to Nathan Cohen's *Longevity Requirements of Sentient Species*. Langmore's lectures, given all over the world throughout the past decade, including those as a professor at Victoria University, were bound in a three-volume set. Included in the box was even the operational manual of the NAH—many of its pages bore Langmore's personal handwritten comments in red ink next to the print.

Six months later, while cruising along the Azure Coast of France, Langmore's secretary sent another package. This one was much smaller. Jethro picked up the padded envelope in Monte Carlo, curious about its contents. Jethro and Langmore were engaging in more and more dialogue via email, often daily now, if Jethro had access to a good Internet connection. Langmore had failed to mention what the package would contain, however. Inside was a four-inch portable hard drive.

Jethro took it back to his boat and uploaded it on his computer. The drive was a virtual archive of the entire transhuman movement, chronologically assembled. Every major article and news clip regarding the history of transhumanism and of the modern scientific quest for life extension was there, in order, easily accessible. Additionally, the drive contained thousands of webcasts and videos to watch. Finally, there were downloads of anti-transhumanism posters, critics' reviews of life extension and human enhancement books, transcribed sermons from Reverend Belinas on the evils of seeking

immortality, and an entire 188-page congressional testimony on the dangers of the transhuman movement.

Langmore had compiled a bona fide digital treasure of transhuman information and history on that hard drive. Jethro was ecstatic to have it, but he also realized there was another six months of studying ahead of him now. That night, after stocking up at a grocery store, Jethro pulled anchor and set sail for the northern coast of Ibiza, where he would tackle the first few months of material. Zoe Bach was no longer incessantly on his mind, but he still thought of her frequently. Jethro had to force himself to focus. He quickly lost himself in his studies, spending sixteen hours a day poring over transhumanism. He embraced the material, keeping in close touch with Langmore, who occasionally offered advice and also answered any questions Jethro asked.

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In all his studies on transhumanism, Jethro Knights decided he connected most with the work of Dr. Nathan Cohen. The scientist's experiments, to combine brain neurons to the hardwiring of computers in order to download human consciousness, seemed the most sensible and important direction for the immortality quest. While getting the human body to live longer was a priority, it was not a long-term solution. Jethro already assumed that the human body, at least as it was, would only be around for another half century in its current form. Dr. Cohen's work was where the real evolutionary jumps could be made. Conscious computerized machines and their digital content, with proper maintenance, could last indefinitely. They were so much more durable than flesh. But this thinking was exactly the most radical as well. Because eventually, perhaps sooner than even many transhumanists would have it, there would be no need left at all for the human body.

Even though Dr. Cohen was obsessed with robotics, his science was steeped in his academic background of organic chemistry—which by nature is a science that delves in far smaller spaces than biology, but isn't as abstract as physics. Cohen spent his five-year Ph.D. at a prestigious London university with an electron microscope, investigating the atomic properties of carbon, the most common element of life. His fascination with transhumanism reached as far back as he could remember. His mother, a prominent black Zimbabwean biochemist, and his father, a dour-appearing French heart surgeon, endowed him with the drive to conquer death. They raised their son mostly in Paris, where as a child his mother told him daily about her toils in biochemistry research. His father shared with him the most complicated heart surgeries he performed.

Their inspiration and guidance helped prime Dr. Cohen to make the jump from a promising graduate student to one of the leading contributors of the transhuman movement. In his late thirties, he secured a large seven-year grant from a well-known university in Virginia, where as a tenured professor he carried out groundbreaking experiments. In a short time, his team became the first to connect chemically-induced human thought with moving robotic fingers; laboratory-created instincts with breathing lungs; and electric stimuli with eyesight focusing. Every mechanized replication of the human body he attempted, he successfully accomplished.

He was on the verge of developing a thinking droid that could jump rope, long considered the crowning achievement of robotic balancing acts—when his funding was quietly pulled. He was told he could regain the money, and much more, if he shared his research with the American military, who would be funding and monitoring his scientific efforts from then on. Furious, he refused. He did not believe in big government and private education being in bed together.

A week later he found his desk moved to a small corner of the university campus, where he was given only limited access to his laboratory. He also discovered that his research funding had been eliminated entirely. He marched into the office of the president of the university—a good friend of

his—demanding an explanation.

The man covered his face when he saw his friend storm in.

“Damn it, Nathan. You know I can't do anything. They'll can me too. Just give in this once, at least for a while. It's just a bunch of science experiments. I have a family to feed and two mortgages to pay, plus a sick mother to care for. I'm sorry. I've tried to do everything I could to prevent this.”

Dr. Cohen discovered they were blackmailing everyone; that government power after the infamous New York terrorist attacks and the nationwide economic downturn had grown too insidious. He resigned, moved west to sunny Arizona, and opened his own scientific consulting company. He sought investors and donors to continue his work, but it was hard to find people to fund “science experiments,” as his friend had trivialized them. Still, he moved forward with his research, albeit much more slowly. His consulting company's laboratory could only afford to occupy two rooms hardly the size of a large garage.

Jethro Knights sat on deck, in the shade of his boat's awning, reading the latest paper out of Dr. Cohen's Arizona clinic. Behind him the ocean shimmered. Clearly, the nanotechnology Cohen was combining with chemistry was the strongest idea going in transhumanism, Jethro thought. The scientist wanted flesh and machine to match perfectly, to become interchangeable—to become one and the same in the future. Jethro agreed, seeing the obvious need to stand up and cast off as an unfit costume the pasty, outdated biology of his species.

## Chapter 11

By the time Jethro Knights motored through the Straits of Gibraltar on a windless day in November—when all that was left of his circumnavigation was a forty-day passage to New York City—he knew all the important ideas, scientists, technologists, and visionaries in the broad, often disorganized field of transhumanism. He also knew every major opponent of transhumanism. His research had taught him all the arguments, victories, failures, and conundrums of the life extension mission, including the intricacies of the science and technology.

Only Preston Langmore had such a comprehensive knowledge of the entire movement. The last time Jethro was on land, in the Canary Islands, he received an email from Langmore inviting him to be a guest speaker at the coming transhumanism conference. Hosted in New York City that year, it was the 25th anniversary of the conference and being billed as the most important transhumanism gathering of the decade. Leaders from all over the world were flying in to attend it. Every key scientist in the field would be there. And Langmore wanted to make sure Jethro Knights met everyone.

Jethro accepted the invitation. In the email, Langmore also pressed Jethro to accept a job as a senior consultant and writer at the World Transhumanist Institute. It was a unique and prestigious opportunity, and a solid foundation for further work in the heart of the movement. After eighteen months of frequent communication and dozens of lengthy, didactic emails, Langmore considered Jethro his protégé—an unofficial apprentice. Jethro wrote back, however, saying he was undecided about the job. He thanked Langmore for his close friendship and the work offer, emphasizing he would strongly consider it; that his commitment to the conquest of immortality and pushing transhumanism forward, whether at his organization or not, was unwavering.

Now that Jethro was almost back home, he focused specifically on how to approach the rest of his life. He had already trimmed down the amount of articles he was doing for *International Geographic*, writing only occasionally when he encountered an exceptional story. His short journalism career made him a respected writer to any organization or media company. But five years of traveling—especially his time in the Kashmir war zone—taught him he didn't belong at a normal job, working for someone else, following other people's ideas, ambitions, and crusades. He felt it antithetical to his immortality

mission, to directly join any groups or companies, even if he respected and saw value in them, or knew they were unequivocally transhuman-oriented.

Instead, Jethro possessed robust, independent vocational ideas for what he wanted to do in the future and how to do it. He thought it best to embark on his own entrepreneurial job creation. His parameters were simple; they were fashioned from the essence of the transhumanism mission. He wanted to be guaranteed to advance beyond his biological human limitations and live indefinitely in freedom, security, and satisfaction. To achieve that, he would do whatever was necessary, as efficiently as possible. That, he declared to himself, would be his new job when he got back home.

Of course, creating ways of earning a reasonable income through the new job would be a priority too, but that snafu could be overcome in time. The sale of his yacht would give him a comfortable financial buffer of many trouble-free months to figure it all out.

On the fifth year and second month of his circumnavigation, the glowing skyline of New York City broke through the fog and silhouetted the black sea. Jethro wrapped up his sails and motored quietly past the Statue of Liberty and up the Hudson River, unnoticed at 3 A.M. This was the man whose every instinct screamed to conquer death—whose instinct the world would one day challenge and attempt to destroy.

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At the core of anything Reverend Belinas did was one dominating tenet, one central philosophy: his impassioned hatred of modern technology. His earliest memories were of a ghastly car accident in Africa. His father, the driver, was instantly killed—crushed by an eighteen-wheel tanker with a front tire blowout that swerved into their speeding minivan on the highway. Miraculously, Belinas, aged six, survived in the back seat, intact. His small body was held in place by a jail of crushed metal all around him. His mother, however, sitting next to him, was ravaged. Partially paralyzed and no longer able to breathe on her own, she was revived by medics in an ambulance, and later put on an artificial respirator at the hospital. For three weeks she showed incremental signs of recovery. Every day, Belinas wept while watching her slowly, painstakingly improve. In the last week, he began to feel hope. His mother was going to survive, one of the doctors finally announced. She might even be able to play with him again in the future, a nurse told him. Then, during a stormy night in Nairobi, when staff were overwhelmed tending other emergencies, the power failed in the hospital and Belinas watched his mother suffocate to death. Her eyes were frozen still, enraged, staring at the powerless respirator machine.

Born to a Scottish mother and a Cuban father in the slums of Mobile, Louisiana, Belinas left America as an infant, to travel with his missionary parents throughout East Africa. Over the next six years, he lived in squalid AIDS orphanages, special needs clinics, and mud churches with thatched roofs. At an impressionable age, he saw things a young mind should never see: emaciated babies starving to death, families torn apart by disease, child prostitution on the streets, warlords ruling the countryside and killing indiscriminately. Later in life, these experiences would grant Belinas the strength to confidently stare down the growing despair and poverty brewing in America. After the horrors he witnessed in Africa, nothing could shock or frighten him anymore.

Following his mother's death, Belinas returned to America. The church of his parents found him a suitable foster home that immediately started him in school. Belinas quickly excelled in all his classes and eventually skipped grades. In high school, his test scores were so impressive that he was accepted to Victoria University on a full academic scholarship at age sixteen. He majored in religious studies. Four years later he matriculated into New Haven, Connecticut's prestigious McKinsie Theological School for graduate work. There, under Dean Wilderun, one of the original anti-transhumanism

defenders, he blossomed into his full spiritual self.

With startup funding from wealthy bankers—the fathers of his classmates—Belinas created his own church based on the popular foursquare concept, where all versions of Christian faith and devotion to God are welcome. He called it *Redeem Church*. His motto was simple, powerful, and energizing: Forget what path we take to God, let's just get to Him—and let's do it now. He emphasized the basics: Follow the Bible; treat your neighbors as you would have them treat you; submit to the Lord and ask for forgiveness of your sins. He threw in at the end: Don't trust technology—it gets in the way of knowing God. It's a form of blasphemy, the original and worst sin. One day Satan will try to overcome us with a “technocalypse.” Beware.

Increasingly, as digital technology dominated every aspect of the twenty-first century—and people linked it with increased governmental control, greater disparity between rich and poor, and withdrawal from nature—Belinas' anti-tech philosophy succeeded. What do you need a cell phone for? Jesus didn't have one. A pacemaker? Pray to God that your heart works; if it doesn't, it's because God may already have something important waiting for you in heaven. The Internet? We don't need instant access to the world's information superhighway; the Bible has all the truths of wisdom you'll ever need. And microchips? That's just how Satan wants to brand and digitally recognize you; it's all part of his attempt to control us. The government and greedy corporations are already doing it.

In the complex modern world—full of cyber-realities, Second World profiles, GPS-locating smart phones, and instant video chatting—people too poor to take advantage of the plethora of gadgets, software applications, and upgrades constantly hitting the market, found solace in the simple, unadorned life. Belinas organized communities to buy large tracts of land and build giant churches with attached housing where the poor could live until they found jobs and were able to survive without handouts. At those sprawling compounds, crops were communally grown, daily attendance at church was encouraged, and religion-centric schools for children were offered. Healthcare was provided at no cost to anyone who needed it, by volunteer Christian doctors.

A massive movement around the United States and Europe under the slogan “Back to God, Back to the Land” exploded—led by Belinas. The more his religious ideas caught on, the more his congregation grew. The more his congregation grew, the more amenities and social assistance came to those who needed it. Soon other churches and religious organizations, not wanting to be left out or lose followers, started down the same path. Belinas' fame grew as the preacher who started it all, the undisputed leader and uniter of the movement.

At first, members in the U.S. Government cautioned that his anti-tech teachings would help send the country farther into recession. But there was fear when politicians openly criticized Belinas' *Redeem Church*. It had simply become too populous to agitate. Belinas held real power by being able to tell his followers how to think and in which direction to vote. Besides, many conservative public officials saw his movement as the beginning of a country trying to find its soul in hard times—and not the decline of the nation. One conservative 82-year-old senator—with a habit of accidentally holding his cell phone upside down—compared it to the 1960s and the Summer of Love. He pointed out that some of those “hippies” ran the largest, most profitable companies in the nation, or were respected teachers, tradespeople, and civil servants. The senator insisted that the nation would find the right way forward, even if it appeared they were heading backward.

The senator was wrong. A decade later, the net result of poverty-stricken areas of the country embracing deeper religious ideologies, anti-tech biases, and communal agrarian lifestyles was to magnify the already massive divide between the haves and have-nots. The difference between poor and rich grew to a historical high, ultimately aggravating the most needy and destitute to find a scapegoat for their problems. The transhumanists, the most vocal of the technology advocates, were a perfect fit. Belinas' plan was unfolding right on target.

His congregation now had millions of voices and enormous resources in tow. Belinas' lobbying in Washington grew until he was one the most aggressive and powerful anti-tech and anti-transhumanist

public figures on the planet. His agenda was both compelling and persuasive.

The *USA Daily Tribune* quoted Belinas as saying, “It’s technology and science that are keeping us away from God and our spiritual souls. That’s why the world is spiraling downward in every way. And the leaders of this downward spiral are the atheist-minded scientists and technologists. Their priests, the transhumanists, aim to eliminate God altogether and bring about their so-called Singularity. This will be Armageddon—when the Book of Revelations is fulfilled, and the Four Horseman wreak terror upon the Earth.”

He repeated the same message in his sermons, a special quality of panic always present in his eyes. When Belinas' power and reputation grew strong enough, he declared battle against the transhumanists, whom he deemed *God-killers*. He openly ordered tens of thousands of his followers to protest on city streets across America. Secretly, he also instructed the most militant of his flock to terrorize research laboratories, clinics, and universities where advanced experimentation was taking place on stem cells, artificial intelligence, cryonics, robotics, cloning, bionics, neurotech, and organ farming.

In a few short months, underground civil unrest across America became commonplace. Bombings, kidnappings, and riots in odd, often low-populated areas spread across the country and into Europe. A Wisconsin university's artificial intelligence computer lab was bombed. The owner of a stem cell clinic in Montana was executed in his car while on the way to work. A private robotics research facility in New Mexico was broken into and lit on fire. The violence was spontaneous. There appeared no rhyme or reason to it all until the police and press connected transhumanism with each incident.

When asked if he was going to use his “Man of the Year” image to restore peace and safety, Belinas was again quoted as saying, “Where there's gasoline, even a single match can cause great damage. Yet, I will do what I can to stem the violence. But let it be known that these events are way beyond the prayers and declarations of one man, or the philosophies of my congregation. They are the will of the downtrodden masses who have been tricked and choked for too many years. Behind them and their hearts is an angry, righteous God who demands submission and will not be defeated.”

The following week, under tight security, the largest demonstration yet was held at the entrance of the 25th Anniversary Transhumanism Conference in New York City. Police and 10,000 demonstrators clashed. During opening night, a truck carrying three million dollars worth of science equipment was overturned and set afire. The drivers were beat upon and had to be rushed to the hospital in ambulances.

Even though many police officers sympathized with the protestors, as did large swaths of the country, cops still insisted on doing their job. The peace was kept just enough for the conference to start and to get the attendees safely inside.

## Chapter 12

After three years of working as the leading public defender in Queensbury, Gregory Michaelson was asked by Senator Shuman to join his political team as a personal aide. Gregory's father helped secure the position for his son.

“It'll be the perfect stepping stone to learn politics in Washington and to start becoming visible,” insisted the older Michaelson. Already, the father was positioning Gregory to take over his job as Senator of their native New York.

“After that,” he continued, “it's all yours, son—anything. The top stone of the pyramid if you play the game right. And you'd better play it right.”

Gregory doubted if he was as ambitious as his father hoped. Politics carried a titanic commitment and workload—he hardly remembered his dad being home during his youth. More similar to his mother, Gregory gravitated towards being an expert socialite. Night after night, he and his wife

Amanda attended social events or entertained guests, sending their two children to their suites early—each tucked into bed by their personal live-in nannies.

In Washington, D.C., Gregory and Amanda bought a historical mansion in a posh neighborhood, and decorated it in Elizabethan Tudor. There were bronze gargoyles on the roof; stone lions guarded the entrance. Gregory also liked his new job in Washington. It was exciting, often socially complex and full of the kind of diplomacy at which he was best: winning over new friends. Mostly there were no decisions to make; just speeches to write, which were so general and vague that one could even decipher what was being communicated, except the notion that people were always being helped and economic prosperity was imminent. It reminded him of law school. Gregory liked to tell people that he was just an over-educated secretary for Shuman.

After two years as a successful aide, including helping Senator Shuman march through a successful re-election campaign, the President of the United States offered Gregory a job as a mid-level advisor. Again, the elder Michaelson arranged the offer. With Shuman's permission and blessing, Gregory jumped at it. His good looks and charisma went well alongside the President and the ever-watchful public eye. Increasingly, the world's leading politician kept Gregory around, and in front of the cameras at the White House. He made Senior Advisor in less than eighteen months and came to know the Speaker of the House, the Federal Reserve Chairman, and other important government members on a first-name basis.

Three years later, at the ideal moment, Gregory's popular father announced that he would not run for senator again because he planned to fully endorse an even better candidate: his son. It was a touching story, relished by the media. Photographers couldn't get enough of the two Michaelsons together. Senator Shuman and the President endorsed Gregory's campaign, even though he was untested in politics and, at age thirty-three, would be the third youngest senator in a century—if elected.

It wouldn't be an easy victory to win the senatorial race. His opponent, experienced Congressman Andy Johnson, aged fifty-four, was savvy and respected. Over a thirty-year career, Johnson had clawed his way up the political ladder from state councilman to lieutenant governor to congressman. He had a reputation for stalwart performances; some left the New York masses unhappy and angry in the short term, but usually were the best solutions for the long term.

Early in his campaign, Gregory, his father, and their combined teams of aides brainstormed about ways to defeat Johnson. Amanda Michaelson attacked the problem directly by hiring detectives to uncover embarrassing personal dirt on the Congressman. She discovered that Johnson, a former structural engineer, was a passionate but publicly undisclosed transhumanist with a fifteen-year history of donating to controversial life extension and human enhancement projects. She ordered her husband to use the inflammatory information against Johnson to help bring them victory at the polls. Gregory agreed, and soon his election team began a smear crusade against the Congressman. With financial backing from his father-in-law, Gregory aired countless commercials discrediting his opponent by painting him as a selfish atheist with radical transhumanist ties. In public speeches, Gregory criticized Johnson and other supporters of transhumanism as extremists and out of touch with the real world. He cited their enthusiasm for extreme science as a slap in the face of poor New Yorkers who simply wanted jobs, affordable housing, inexpensive healthcare, and decent educations—not immortality, computerized consciousnesses, and robotic body parts.

With only five weeks left before the election, Gregory's strategy was solidly working. He maintained a comfortable twelve-point lead against Johnson in the polls. Then came the prime-time IMN-televised debate between the candidates. The main issue discussed was the frail New York economy and how new jobs might be created. Johnson's forceful ideas, experience, and business sense stunned and pummeled Gregory. The young candidate found himself at a loss for words, trying to backtrack his statements on national television. He managed only to look sheepish and inexperienced. Throughout the debate, sweat drops shined oddly on Gregory's face, and his red tie hung comically

crooked.

After the debate, Amanda wouldn't speak to her husband for days. The media began incessantly questioning whether Gregory possessed the skills, fortitude, and experience required for the job. A week later, the polls officially put him behind Johnson by a staggering ten points. Something miraculous needed to happen in the next four weeks before voting day, for Gregory to clinch the election.

The following evening, a phone call from Reverend Belinas reached Gregory's senior campaign secretary. The preacher asked if he could speak with Mr. Gregory Michaelson. She told him that he was at a fundraiser for the evening, but that he would be available early the following morning at his office.

"May I ask what the call is about, sir?" she inquired.

Belinas replied prophetically, "Tell him it will be the most important call of his career—that is, if he *really* wants to win the New York Senate election. I'll phone him early in the morning. Please make sure he's in."

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The following day at dawn, Jethro Knights tied his boat up to the same dock he had departed from five years before on the Hudson River. He went ashore, walked over to a nearby coffee shop, and powered up his laptop. He listed his sailboat for sale on an Internet auction site. At noon he went to a restaurant near the transhumanism conference and met Dr. Preston Langmore, Dr. Nathan Cohen, and Dr. John Whalefish, the renowned neurosurgeon. Whalefish's procedure of installing visual-stimuli chips into blind people's brains enabled them to partially see, and had made him world-famous.

At the lunch table in a corner of the restaurant, Jethro spoke little and listened much. The three scientists plotted strategies for the movement's future and discussed problems created by Reverend Belinas' anti-transhumanists. Afterward, on the walk towards the conference, Langmore inquired whether Jethro had decided to take the job offer with the World Transhumanist Institute, now that he was home.

"I believe I've made my decision," said Jethro. "I'll know for sure by my speech tomorrow."

Langmore looked dubiously at him, but didn't inquire further.

After tomorrow night, Jethro thought, Langmore and his colleagues will not look at me the same. Listening to these men at lunch, Jethro affirmed what he had known all along: even the brightest, most respected transhumanists didn't possess workable plans to push the movement forward with the speed and force he believed was necessary. In his lifetime and theirs, they would fail to fulfill the possibilities of the transhuman destiny of overcoming death. They would die. He would die.

Jethro could not go with the flow and would not join their lackluster aspirations. He knew these men unequivocally believed in transhumanism, but not with the same ferocity as he did. For them, it was a dream—somewhat academic, somewhat romantic, a grand adventure overall—and if they didn't make it and reach immortality, then their children or grandchildren would.

Jethro Knights' perspective was different and much more radical. Years of contemplation during his sailing trip had cemented his thoughts on the matter. More than ever, he believed he was an individual, self-sustaining entity, bent on acquiring as much power as possible in life. He needed it to achieve immortality, which was an essential step of transhumanism and self-preservation. It was only the first step, however, in the complex evolutionary purpose he believed was his destiny. His ultimate goal was that of the omnipotender: one who contends for omnipotence. He wanted a universal dictatorship—or at least a draw—over everything and everyone. It was not an easy thing to name. Nobody wanted to befriend someone who appeared so selfish, or to trust someone so egocentric. But everybody was heading in the same direction, to the same epiphany. Deep down inside, it was the

fabric of humankind, built into us from the start, millions of years in the making: that we are each born unequal; that we are each born unfinished; that we are each born to conquer the other. Some may call it a *will to power*—though Jethro believed it was a *will to evolution*—an entity's most imbued trait, the DNA of the universe. It was both the goal and the prize. Give every sane and rational person a big red button to push to achieve instantaneous omnipotence, and all of them would quickly jam their fingers down on it.

The logic and reality of this was impossible to deny. Billions of sheeplike people may pretend the human animal is different; that humans are loving, humble, gentle, and altruistic creatures. Jethro, however, knew better. He knew that culture, religion, democracy, social ethics, and legal systems were just blinding forms of glorified masochistic conduct. He knew they were just ways to ensure subordination of individual ambitions to society's collective control—to promote the greater good of humanity at the expense of the most singularly talented.

Nearly all the great social institutions and ideals of the world are forms of masochism in one way or another, Jethro thought. They are peppered with gross bigotry towards the individually strong, towards those seeking the best in themselves. The transhuman omnipotender and its ways are so different; it doesn't consider the inconsequential or unequal worth considering. And it never strives to hurt or to sacrifice itself for anything.

The powerful and evolved individuals of the transhuman movement understand this. They name their natural-born desire for power as it is: a simple unchallengeable fact, requiring zero fear, remorse, or division in themselves. Then, when they deal with peers and others to reach their ambitions, they make candid, rational barter. They offer up mutual respect to whoever will help their overall plight—to whoever agrees to help, for whatever reasons they might possess. It's a dependable, efficient system, anchored by upfront integrity and honesty—not denial, weakness, and obfuscation.

It doesn't mean that one can't love, help, empathize, or even give their life for another, should such a possibility transpire. But the core is determined: It is selfish. Wholly selfish. Originally selfish. Damn selfish. And one needs to have the courage to start from that egocentric core—to completely drop the mammalian, egalitarian, and humanitarian bent, confusingly leading elsewhere, leading to blind sacrifice. Evolution and the universe do not allow for any free kindness, any forgiveness, any lapse of strength. They do not allow for anything without consequence.

Neither should he, Jethro believed. He hoped the others would understand, would reach the same conclusions, would stand together to defeat that which needed to be defeated in the best interests of the individuals pushing the transhuman movement. Later, those interests could determine themselves and where to go next. This was how evolved beings acted. And in fifty or a hundred years, when the strongest, most advanced humans became conscious super-machines, new systems of ethics could be navigated if necessary. Ones even more radical. Best to start adjusting now, Jethro thought.

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The transhumanism conference was held at the Phillips Expo Center, which occupied the largest indoor space in New York City. The main hall was sixty feet high and two football fields long. With over 300 booths dedicated to transhumanism and its science, it took a full day of walking and reading about projects just to see everything. The conference ran three days, with sit-in lectures by leading scientists scheduled from 10 A.M. to 3 P.M. in nearby auditoriums. On the final day, dinner and cocktails were scheduled to begin at 6 P.M. in the center's banquet hall. Dr. Nathan Cohen, Dr. John Whalefish, and Jethro Knights were among those chosen to speak, each allotted ten minutes. Jethro was advertised as an *International Geographic* journalist whose driving passion was conquering human death, as well as the philosopher who popularized the omnipotender concept in the now classic and

controversial essay, *Rise of the Transhuman Citizen*. He was scheduled to be the last speaker before Dr. Preston Langmore, who would give the closing words of the conference.

Jethro enjoyed walking around the booths. Langmore made sure he met many of the important scientists, most of whom hung around their areas promoting their research, technologies, and inventions. One of Nathan Cohen's former students, now a robotics professor, demonstrated playing Ping-Pong with his five-foot droid. Another man, an Italian, one of the foremost cloning experts in the world, had two juvenile orangutans hanging on him. Each creature appeared indistinguishable from the other and acted with nearly identical mannerisms. A South Korean engineer was in front of his booth, running pi algorithms in a basketball-sized computer he held in his lap. It was reputed to be the smallest supercomputer in the world. A woman from Guyana, a Ph.D. researcher, had developed a drug from Ergot, a root that enhanced memory retention. She was giving out free samples in Dixie cups.

“Kool-Aid, anyone?” she said, jesting. “Kool-Aid?”

Jethro attended numerous lectures and listened to many people's conversations. There was a warm camaraderie in the air; however, between the handshakes and greetings of friendly faces, he could see many attendees were dismayed. They complained that this year's conference was smaller than last year's. And last year's conference was smaller than the year before that. There just wasn't enough money to go around anymore. Scientists were increasingly unable to sell their technology or inventions—many didn't even get booths because of the prohibitive cost. The demand for avant-garde science products dried up with swelling public skepticism over transhumanism and the dismal global economy.

Even worse, few scientists could see anything changing in the near future. Some said the movement was bound to stall completely in the next few years. Others predicted it would survive only in tiny pockets around the world. Optimism about its promise, so strong just a decade ago, was nowhere to be found.

During the final night of the conference, in the crowded banquet hall, people sat listening to speakers, sipping their cocktails, and waiting for the presentations to end so dinner could be served. Jethro sat amongst the other speakers by a long table near the podium. Dr. Whalefish was just finishing his speech on the need to recruit new people and resources to the transhuman movement. People in the audience yawned, nibbling their breadsticks.

A short applause followed the scientist's speech, and Preston Langmore stood up and walked to the podium. He introduced Jethro Knights and gave a quick biography of the young man. A few people in the audience clapped and others roused, curious about what the popular journalist and author of the radical paper would say.

“Thank you, Preston,” Jethro said after arriving at the podium. He paused and carefully scanned the room, studying the audience. A bright stage light filtered through his eyes, so he couldn't see Zoe Bach in the far corner, standing with a swarm of other observers.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have been graciously offered a job by Dr. Langmore, as a writer and senior consultant to the World Transhumanist Institute. For a man of my young age, it's a welcome opportunity to directly participate in the transhuman movement.”

Some in the audience gently applauded, assuming Jethro was going to accept the job. It seemed gracious of him to do so publicly. Interest was piqued.

“However,” he said loudly, bringing many in the audience to sharp attention, “I will not take the job. I will not become just another cog of your lethargic movement. Or of this lethargic conference. Or of the scientists here today who are hungry for so much more, but actually do little to fulfill that hunger. Your watered-down version of transhumanism is too weak for me. Your vision is sluggish and tedious. You criticize and complain about those fools on the outside; about the conservative government leaders who strangle us and withhold our resources; about the religious populace who cut off our moral authority and condemn us; about the anti-transhumanists who throw rocks at us and terrorize us. But you—out there today, in *this* audience—you do nothing about it.

“We all know what marginal progress, what little power, what lagging sophistication and innovation the world would have without us pioneering creators. It was our efforts, our brains, our genius that designed the planet’s nuclear warheads; that tamed its deadly viruses; that engineered its supercomputers; that sent satellites all across the solar system; that penned its most beneficial and liberating philosophies. Yet, you still agree to play by all *their* rules, in *their* game, under *their* laws—just so you may have the begged-for honor of trying to achieve your immortality and your transhuman goals at a glacial pace.

“You continually let them tell us what we can do and what we cannot do. You let them hold carrots in front of us that we rarely reach, while our dreams fall by the wayside. And if occasionally you do reach a carrot, they steal it back from you, telling you that it belongs to them. That it belongs to the uneducated layperson, or the idiot, or the beggar, or the freeloader on the street. That it belongs to their sacred concept of humanity. That it belongs to everyone but you, the ones who made it possible. It’s absurd, my fellow transhumanists. And it’s a game I will not play.

“Five years ago, I left to sail around the world after that debacle of the Transhumanism Town Hall Forum put on by our countries’ imbecilic leaders, hoping to return to a movement that had progressed forward, hoping that transhumanism stood a better chance to achieve its goals than it did before. And I ask you now, what has changed since then?”

Jethro Knights paused, sternly observing the room. Everyone was at full attention now. Many in the audience appeared stunned. Security personnel looked at each other, wondering where his speech was going, if it was allowed—and whether they should stop it.

“What has changed?” Jethro demanded, his voice hard and piercing. “Nothing, I tell you. Nothing at all has changed. In fact, things are far worse for all of us. The end of our lives are closer than ever. And it’s because your methods are gentle, quiet, and mouselike. They are, in my opinion, spineless. I declare your version of the transhuman movement a failure. I declare your strategy feeble, weathered, and aged. I don’t want to hear about your science and ten-year studies anymore. Some of the best of you will be dead in ten years. I want a real victory. I want real progress. I want real change. I want our immortality guaranteed. I want a transhuman world now—while I’m still alive on Earth to experience and appreciate it.

“My fellow transhumanists, the reason I have come here tonight is not to join your movement, but to ask you to embrace mine. Tonight, I ask you to answer a novel calling, a courageous challenge, a new stealth form of transhumanism. Tonight, I am starting a new course for our futuristic dreams. Tonight I am launching the *Transhuman Revolution*. It will be an unyielding, ultra-aggressive declaration to fight anything that stands in the way of our transhuman way of life. I implore you to join me in waging this battle.

“To lead the revolution I am creating an assertive direct-action organization called ‘Transhuman Citizen.’ You may have read or heard about the type of transhuman champion that belongs to this group in my essay, *Rise of the Transhuman Citizen*. Our goal is to lead a global uprising—to transform our backwards planet into a forward-looking transhuman world, full of unlimited scientific promise. Our aim is to make that new world uncompromising in its moral thoughts, actions, and transhuman creations. And we will stop at nothing to do so.

“But you cannot join Transhuman Citizen by continuing to belong to two worlds—to *theirs* and to ours. There is no middle ground in this revolutionary quest; you’ve already proven that the neutral or halfhearted path is a wasted, futile act. To succeed in the Transhuman Revolution, you must now choose sides. You must choose to be a citizen of *their* world—or a citizen of transhumanism.”

Jethro paused, feeling the energy of the room. People’s glares flowed right into him.

“Transhuman Citizen follows a guiding and comprehensive individualist philosophy called TEF. It stands for Teleological Egocentric Functionalism. Teleological—because it is every advanced individual’s inherent design and desired destiny to evolve. Egocentric—because it is based on each of our selfish individual desires, which are of the foremost importance. Functional—because it will only

be rational and consequential. And not fair, nor humanitarian, nor altruistic, nor muddled with unreachable mammalian niceties. The philosophy is essential because it doesn't allow for passive failure. It doesn't allow transhumanists to live in delusion while our precious years of existence pass."

Jethro inhaled a deep breath and saw the crowd's faces upon him; many looked skeptical and reserved. He said, "I see your eyes upon me asking questions. You want to know exactly what Transhuman Citizen and TEF are? What they will do differently than you? How far will they go to succeed? I tell you now, our organization and philosophy is an undertaking of war—yes, war—to connect today to the tomorrow we want, regardless of the cost. We are a warriorlike system of thought and moral action designed to find the best in ourselves. TEF is a philosophy defining the most expedient course an individual can take to reach one's most powerful and advanced self, whose primary initial purpose is to achieve immortality so that one creates enough time for oneself to reach omnipotence. It is not concerned with whose world it alters or destroys to get there. There is no right or wrong in its mission. Just failure or success, life or death.

"To execute the Transhuman Revolution, Transhuman Citizen will soon begin approaching the wealthiest, smartest, most powerful, most fearless, most ambitious, and most capable people in the world—many of you. And convince them we need to act and start fighting now; that we can pave our way to unparalleled life extension and human enhancement for those who deserve and desire it. We will dedicate all we have to succeed. We will subordinate our nations, our families, our friends, and our wealth to reach victory. Nothing will stand in our way. We will build a brave new reality and vision for the world. We will buy it, steal it, or create it by force if that is what must be done. We shall construct a civilization where our experiments will go unmolested by others who think it's their right to judge us and to stop us.

"The morality of Transhuman Citizen is defined and decided by the amount of time we have left to live. Not by democracy, decency, altruism, kindness, or notions of humanity and mammalian love—and especially not by that petty, archaic concept of religion. It is forged by the evolutionary dictates of our deepest instincts and reason, which scream to overcome death and launch an advance into our brilliant future. That is our mounting cry.

"Over the next few years you will see us prowling the streets in your cities, in your universities, in your backyards. You will see us on television and in the newspapers. You will hear us coming through the radio. You will watch us stream across the Internet. Not only for our defiant campaigns, or for our radical scientific discoveries, or for our influential hand in reshaping the culture of our species. But also for whomever we have beaten down. For whomever we have humiliated and humbled. For what religions we have ridiculed and thwarted. For what governments we have sabotaged and upended. And, quite possibly, for what enemy we have maimed and killed. Because we will lobby not only with resources, intellect, and forceful attitude, but also with might. With power. With militancy. With ferocious terror, if we have to. You will know the wrath and morality of a people who will stop at nothing to achieve immortality and the goals of transhumanism.

"I urge you to join me, for I can see you are my allies—my brothers, sisters, and friends. Our very lives are at stake this moment. And every minute we give them, we take away from ourselves. I urge you to support and join Transhuman Citizen and its philosophy TEF—radical as it may be to you—as we embark on the most critical journey of our lives, and embrace the quest to discover how far we can go as humans, as cyborgs, as conscious intelligent machines, as rays of light, as pure energy, as anything the future brings.

"May you all reach your dreams in the Transhuman Revolution."

Jethro Knights was finished, standing tall and observing the hall. The media's television camera operators, who stood mostly bored throughout the night, were utterly awake now, focusing their machines on Jethro's face—his brows, his blazing blue eyes, his utter seriousness. The room was silent, but it still felt loud. Jethro's words lingered, echoed, were heavy in everyone's consciousness.

Preston Langmore didn't know what to make of it. Or what to say. He sat frozen. Most of the

crowd did the same, shocked and speechless. Only a lone woman, standing far in the back, grinned and clenched her fists together, her heart pounding violently.

Then, after nearly twenty seconds, a young scientist stood up in front. He cautiously began to clap, his hands slowly coming together. Moments later, another young person stood up and clapped, and then another; then the older ones began joining in. The words Jethro said played over in many people's minds, especially in those of the eldest: *Some of the best of you will be dead in ten years. . . . I want a transhuman world now—while I'm still alive on Earth to experience and appreciate it.*"

Soon, applause from all over roared throughout the hall. Some people raised their knuckles together and made the transhumanist sign by crossing their index fingers and thumbs into an infinity symbol. Others whistled, hooted, or stomped their feet. Jethro hit a nerve. The agonizingly slow slithering of the transhuman movement reared its head and revealed its teeth. No one was going to leave through the back exit tonight.

Jethro bowed in grateful acknowledgment to the standing ovation. He picked up his papers and walked alone down the middle of the isle to the banquet hall's exit doors, and then continued through the empty conference floor past the vacant booths. Some photographers and videographers followed closely behind him.

When Jethro Knights reached the outside of the Phillips Expo Center, he descended the wide marble steps of the main entrance, unhurried. Within twenty meters of the building, thousands of barricaded protesters waited and shouted. Tense police stood together, holding the mob back. One of the protestors took aim and lobbed a large rock at Jethro as he neared the bottom of the steps. The stone missed. Jethro watched the rock hit the steps, roll, and stop a few meters from his feet. He walked to it, picked it up, and looked coldly at the crowd. Then he pitched it with full force right back from where it came.

## PART II

### Chapter 13

After the transhumanism conference, Jethro Knights quickly found a buyer for his sailboat. The draw of such a proven seaworthy vessel brought in a quick, fair price. Jethro went to the bank with the proceeds and paid off his school loans in full. Later, he took the subway to a used car dealer in the Bronx and bought a hardtop Jeep. He put the total of his possessions inside. There wasn't much: old clothes, a laptop, a cell phone, a camera, and his 100 favorite books. He didn't own anything else. And he only had enough money left for another six months before he would be forced to find work. He was poor by most American standards, but Jethro didn't recognize it. He only felt emboldened and rich with experience. A quickness was noticeable in his steps, from the excitement of formally founding Transhuman Citizen and its philosophy, TEF.

His plan was to drive to California where he could live in the heart of innovative Silicon Valley, outside San Francisco. The three-day drive would give him time to develop a comprehensive plan. At a gas station outside New York City, he bought a large cup of coffee and began the journey. As the land's topography changed—and hills and farmlands began passing by—his mind flashed to the conference and his speech, to his studies on the transhuman movement and its scientists, to his sailing trip and the *International Geographic* stories. And, finally, to Zoe Bach.

He knew she was still working in San Francisco. That was easy enough to discover simply by searching for her on the Web. He told himself she wasn't the reason he was going there. Silicon Valley was the global epicenter of technology and the birthplace of modern transhumanism. It was the obvious place to develop TEF and his organization. Still, he was glad she was there. He hoped that she was still

available—or at least not married yet. He thought to himself, I'm almost ready to contact her.

But not yet. Like hundreds of days before, he forced himself to not think about her. To focus his mind on the important tasks ahead. To hone the concentration needed to achieve what must be done. The most important item was writing a detailed philosophical manifesto of TEF—the rally call for his kind of transhuman devotion. Those who read it and believed in it would form the nucleus of his souped-up group—and, hopefully, the heart of the Transhuman Revolution.

Jethro arrived in Palo Alto, the center of the valley, just before dawn, after driving continuously for sixty hours. He was accustomed to such a schedule, where he would stay awake for days and nights at a time, watching for ships and reefs. At a liquor store, he found a local newspaper and called a housing rental agency, inquiring about a small unfurnished apartment for rent. An agent showed him the vacant unit later that afternoon. It was near a gym with an Olympic-sized swimming pool. There were jogging trails in the nearby hills. A 24-hour coffee shop was only two blocks away. Bookstores and a library were within easy walking distance.

He took the apartment and moved in later that evening. Now he was near three of the West Coast's best universities: Vantage, San Aliza, and Breherst. It would be the ideal location to recruit people. Vantage had the technology and computer innovators. San Aliza had the biotech and medical researchers. Breherst—with its history of dissidence—had the philosophers and troublemakers. All were needed.

Jethro spent the first week establishing Transhuman Citizen: acquiring a physical address for mail; getting a phone line and Internet access; and launching a working website with a mission statement, news section, and a condensed version of his writings. He also designed a logo for TEF—an insignia for instant recognition and universal promotion. It was a sparse, metallic, elegant version of the infinity symbol. After his speech at the transhumanism conference, people were already contacting him, and he needed to present them with a basic infrastructure of his organization and philosophy, so they knew something was occurring and would check back again.

When much of the clerical gruntwork was done, Jethro sat down in his apartment and began the manifesto. Penning the philosophy of the manuscript was demanding. He worked on it sixteen hours a day, incorporating his years of writing, conversations, speeches, experiences, and thoughts on transhumanism into it. He often referred to his sailing trip's journal for guidance and inspiration. When he came to a problem that couldn't easily be solved or a paragraph that didn't sound right, he went for a long run in the hills or a swim in the nearby pool. By the time he was back and out of the shower, he knew what needed to be said.

Finally, after three weeks, he finished. It was fifty-two pages long. The first page read:

### *The TEF Manifesto: Philosophy of the Transhuman Citizen*

*The history of the transhumanist is the history of evolution. We, the transhumanists, are that budding manifestation of our universe's ascension to its purest, most potentially powerful form. It is our birthright that we should now transform that evolution into our new future—into our luminous expansion over everything.*

*We have always cherished our miraculous lives. We have always pledged our loyalty to the highest experiences of our existence. We are conscious, independent, rational entities on a quest to achieve unending, omnipotent power so that we may indefinitely preserve our experience of life and the finest, most valuable existence we can attain. These truths are innate and infallible. These truths are the essence of evolution.*

Jethro Knights' manifesto continued, page after page, citing a plethora of life extension tautologies; dissecting the Three Laws of Transhumanism; expounding on the Transhumanist Wager;

breaking down the morality of the omnipotender; exploring the coming future of human enhancement; discussing possibilities of the Singularity; offering intricate details of Teleological Egocentric Functionalism; inciting consequences of the Transhuman Revolution; and, finally, warning of the dangers of society's addiction to illogicality, egalitarianism, historical culture, blind consumerism, and religion.

The manifesto ended with:

*Transhumanists of the world, unite! The universe will offer no forgiveness to those of you who abandon your transhuman mission. Unite together and defeat the irrationality, mediocrity, and theistic fearmongers of the world who wish to enslave science and halt evolutionary advancement. Unite and reach your dreams by achieving an undeniable victory for the Transhuman Revolution.*

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Gregory Michaelson threw down his pen when he heard his secretary knock on his door. He was grateful to be disturbed. It was 9:15 A.M., and he hadn't stopped working since he walked into his office at dawn. Ever since he had started campaigning to become a Senator for New York, he found himself emphatically busy with zero time for anything outside of politics. There was no question in his mind that running for such an important office carried privileges. He was the constant center of attention: everyone wanted to meet him; important people showered him with praise; and wealthy donors pledging campaign contributions hinted at large kickbacks for him down the road.

Surprisingly, much of it wore thin quickly. Existing on five hours of sleep per night for the last month, Gregory felt only the heavy burden of responsibilities—recently made worse by his poor showing in the debate against Andy Johnson. His daily socializing now bore so much significance, not the get-tipsy-share-a-cigar-and-laugh-with-the-boys routine. There were so many people to say the right things to, so many wealthy widows and donors to pet the correct way. So much power to handle carefully. A hefty share of stress was now ubiquitous in his every waking hour, especially from his wife's glaring eyes.

"Don't lose for us, Gregory. Your children and I don't want to be embarrassed. I didn't sign up for marrying a loser."

The pressure from her over the past few months was growing unbearable.

"Damn it, Amanda! You know I can't control what happens," snapped Gregory one evening in the kitchen, overtired and out of character.

She turned furious towards him, her face ugly and vicious. "Don't you dare swear at me. Just work harder and figure out how to get back ahead of Johnson," she screamed, then bolted to another section of the house.

That was three days ago, and Gregory had remained in a slump ever since. Amanda still wouldn't talk to him, even after he apologized three separate times.

"Sir, it's Reverend Belinas on the line," announced Gregory's secretary. "The call you've been waiting for."

Gregory's eyes shot to the phone. His spirit immediately jumped and his mind began racing. He was overwhelmed by the possibilities of what Belinas' call could mean. He cleared his throat and said, "Thank you, Donna. Put him through. I'll pick up."

Gregory picked up the phone and said, "Good morning."

"Good morning to you, Mr. Michaelson," boomed a voice through the receiver. "Thank you so much for taking my call. I'm sure you're busy."

The voice spoke as if it knew that everyone took its calls.

"It's my pleasure to speak with you, Reverend Belinas. My wife and I watch your program on IMN often. We think you're fantastic."

"Oh, that is good. That is just perfect. Thank you. I've been meaning to call you ever since you announced you were running for senator. I'm rooting for you, you know."

"That's very kind of you, sir," Gregory said. "I'm trying to do my best in the campaign. And I hope, if I win, I will be able to make the lives of New Yorkers better."

"Of course. Of course. I'm sure you will—which is just why I called. You see, I believe you and I share so much in common, so much more than I do with Andy Johnson, that pro-transhumanist renegade you're running against. And I'm deeply concerned about the welfare of New York since a few million believers in my congregation live there, most in destitution."

Belinas continued speaking about conservative Christian values and about how important the state of New York was to the country.

"And I must tell you, Mr. Michaelson, I'm especially proud of you for taking a firm stance against transhumanism and its scientists."

"Thank you, sir. I've been trying to uphold traditional values and keep whatever government resources and money there are with the people, not the experimental scientists."

Gregory knew that most people who belonged to Redeem Church didn't vote. Even though their numbers were large, historically they avoided the polls. Most were apathetic to politics, hoping their faith would make things better instead. On occasion, however, they were known to vote in mass when ordered to do so. Gregory treaded carefully, fishing for what Belinas wanted.

"I really appreciate your noticing my campaign, Reverend. I'm grateful you approve of it."

"Approve...yes...hmmm..." Belinas said magnanimously, as if on the verge of completing a problem in his head. "Mr. Michaelson, I was hoping we could meet for dinner later this week. I'd love to talk to you and get to know you better. And also to speak to you about something very specific. I'm sure you're just the right man for some important ideas I have."

Many senators and high government officials were in Reverend Belinas' back pocket. It was considered a strategic and favorable place to be. But there were tradeoffs. One didn't negotiate with Belinas. Not with the preacher who swore in the current U.S. President and continued to advise him on a myriad of issues. Not with the mentor of Peter Wilby, CEO and chairman of IMN. Belinas was on a friendly, first-name basis with a number of the most powerful people on Earth. Recently, he was photographed at the opening of the World Trade Expo in China, sitting at the prized right of the Chinese Premier. Six months ago, he married a Swedish royal daughter to a billionaire aluminum tycoon. Last week, he lunched with Brazil's President, and then joined him afterward, cheering at an important soccer match in Rio de Janeiro. For a man who didn't hold any government positions, Belinas' influence and power were unmistakable.

Gregory knew there was a rumor floating around that Belinas was leading the formation of a major new agency in the U.S. Government, supported by the President, to monitor and control the technology and research of transhumanists. Apparently, the Reverend had convinced the President that terror and violence in America could best be subdued by creating a new federal security entity. Gregory thought that Belinas probably wanted him on its formation committee or something similar. But he would have to be elected senator to qualify. Perhaps Belinas was going to throw his congregation's weight Gregory's way. That could be an enormous boost—maybe even enough to get him elected.

"Of course, Reverend. Dinner would be fine. I know there are a few slots open this week. Please be in touch with my secretary, who controls my schedule, and I'll be happy to meet you when you're available."

"Thank you, Mr. Michaelson. It's so good to know I can count on you," said Belinas slowly, knowing the aspiring politician had little choice but to agree.

Gregory wasn't aware of how grand a role Belinas was preparing for him. The preacher aimed to make that handsome, youthful face one of the most powerful in the world. Gregory Michaelson showed

all the signs of a perfect puppet.

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Jethro Knights drove his jeep to the redwood forest in Big Sur for a weekend of camping, after he finished the *TEF Manifesto*. He knew a milestone had been reached in his life, a crossing of paths. He felt the culmination of his five-year sailing trip was the manifesto: a concise embodiment of his philosophy on life, a guide map to his future, a manual for the Transhuman Revolution. Sitting by the ember-filled fire pit at night, staring at stars that towered over the redwoods, he knew he had forever left behind his youth. The manifesto, the convictions it contained, and the reasons behind writing it were not a point from which he could turn back anymore. This moment was now—forever. Before, he was still an adventurer exploring oceans, lands, ideas, himself, and whatever brilliance appeared on the horizon. Now, however, he firmly arrived on his soil, planted his flag into the earth, and adamantly began to build the world he had wanted.

Within another four weeks, his organization was fully up and running. He printed business cards bearing the TEF infinity logo, opened a company checking account at a nearby international bank, and created an extensive website with dozens of carefully crafted media pages. He rented a commercial studio office near downtown Palo Alto and added Transhuman Citizen to all the local phone books and Internet search engines. He bought a new desktop computer, a video camera, and a business printer for creating promotional materials and handouts. Prominently hanging on his office wall, and also appearing on the website's homepage, was an open letter to the world—a near verbatim copy of his speech at the transhumanism conference.

Jethro also spent time creating small departments for his organization in preparation of rapid future growth: a donation arm to assist with funding; an investment branch to infuse inventors and transhuman companies with cash and resources; a webpage of links leading to other life extension and human enhancement organizations. There were dozens of printable pamphlets, videos, and informational pieces on transhumanism available on his website. There were representations of art, books, and ideas the movement embraced and supported. A Transhuman Citizen advisory board was formed, which included respectable scientists and entrepreneurs whom Jethro recruited to lend his group credibility and transparency.

Dr. Preston Langmore agreed, albeit carefully, to be on Jethro's board despite his peers at the World Transhumanist Institute taking a wait-and-see approach. Langmore didn't want to be left out of whatever his protégé did. This might be a naissance of the new generation of transhumanists he was after, even if it wasn't under his control. The aging scientist and leader was a master of diplomacy because of a single idea he had always followed: Progress, not control, is the prime motive.

Of course, most important to any budding organization was money from funders; Jethro had none of these yet. Money in that environment, the seventh year of a global economic downturn, was exceedingly difficult to obtain. Those who possessed it held on to it carefully. Financial self-preservation via cash hoarding had become the most prudent business move of the past decade. Any attempts to grow equity were often met with staggering losses. The stock market's volume was the lowest in a decade. Most indexes were off over 40 percent. Real estate and oil prices were down over 50 percent from highs reached nearly eight years before. Even the initial spike in gold—the world's supposed safety currency—had recently begun collapsing. Financial analysts named it the globe's Lost Decade.

So far, Jethro had accomplished the launching of Transhuman Citizen on the money he had made from the sale of his yacht and his former journalism job. But that cash was running out quickly. To preserve resources he lived sparsely, using little, shopping carefully, and cooking many of his own

meals. His apartment was nearly bare except for a few pieces of functional furniture, a laptop computer, and of course, books. There was a growing wall-to-wall section of used books, ordered online or cheaply picked up at secondhand bookstores.

Jethro began the conquest of securing donors by reading do-it-yourself manuals on fundraising. A dozen bestselling books were available on the subject by famous salespeople, all who claimed to have easily raised millions of dollars. Jethro thought it looked basic enough. He began every day by cold calling fifty people across the country who might be useful. Langmore secretly gave him the World Transhumanist Institute's donor list, full of thousands of current and past supporters. Over the years, it had proved itself a money tree.

After ten days, however, only two people made donations: one at twenty-five dollars, and another at fifty dollars. That was nothing, thought Jethro, cursing. He tried harder, calling some people twice, but the responses were painful to him.

A retired architect, aged and worn out by a hectic life, told Jethro, “I checked out your website after the first time we talked—there’s some interesting stuff on it. But that manifesto of yours isn’t worded very well. The thing is too philosophical and dramatic. I do wish you luck, though. Transhumanism is just something I’m not that into right now. I used to swear by it when I was younger. There’s probably a future in it, but who knows anymore? Life gets more exhausting the older you get. These days I just look forward to sunning on my deck in the countryside, with a martini in hand.”

Another potential donor, the widow of a once important transhumanism supporter, spoke nonstop to Jethro for ten minutes of her husband’s past devotion to the movement. “Oh, he went to all the conferences. He had some friends in very high places because of his advertising business. He was always looking for new and exciting ideas. I remember the time he went to Utah for one of the first major transhumanism gatherings....”

Jethro was certain this woman would want to make a sizeable donation. He listened politely, then sprang his request upon her.

“What? What is that?” she answered. “How about *me* donating? Oh no. I only donate now to homeless shelters in Tennessee.”

During another cold call, a former virologist told Jethro, “Oh yes, I’ve heard about you. Reckless, many say. Want to push the immortality issue with force, right down the throats of government and organized religion. Transhuman Citizen—viva the revolution! Well, best of luck. I hate them too. But not with my money. I haven’t enough to keep my family fed. Haven’t you seen the news? Research like you dream of is dead. Half of us Ph.D.s are unemployed. The other half are researching what the government deems acceptable. I’m thankful I’ve got a decent job waiting tables.”

The donor list Jethro was given proved a waste of time. The World Transhumanist Institute used professional fundraisers, and even *they* couldn’t make much use of it anymore. How was Jethro Knights, with his less than amicable personality, going to convince donors? Jethro lacked that salesman’s slick touch to get funders to draw out their checkbooks. While others soothed, encouraged, and massaged egos of strangers’ personalities, Jethro’s method was loud, coarse, and aggressive—like a bulldozer.

Still, Jethro tried. “Listen to me, sir, this is our lives we’re talking about. Not some football game. Don’t you want to do something about it? I’m doing something about it. And transhumanists need your help and money to do much more.”

When people hung up the phone, most of them thought to themselves: Who the hell does this guy think he is—asking for money and telling me what I need to do?

Jethro told Langmore his problem.

“I figured as much, Jethro. You’re not a salesman, my friend.”

“I can learn to be one.”

“No, I don’t think so. You’re missing that particular quality: the ability to adjust and cater to people’s personalities in order to convince them to buy something. It usually requires juicing the

delicate idiosyncrasies of a person's pride. Mildly lying and deceiving are a big part of it, and you don't do those well at all. Not whatsoever."

Langmore went into his contacts book and flipped slowly through its pages, writing down ten names and their addresses.

Eventually, he handed Jethro a piece of paper and said, "Try these people. They're wealthy, powerful, and stubborn. One is a real estate mogul. Another is a famous actor. Another is a major pharmaceutical executive. One is even the North American right-hand man of oil baron, Frederick Vilimich. It'll only take one of them to sign on and you'll get a few years of financial breathing room for your group. You'll need to meet them each in person—they're all on the West Coast here. They won't accept phone call pitches. Spend the gas money. Play the game. Tell them you're Victoria alumni. Tell them I recommended you. Tell them things they want to hear. But whatever you do, don't insult them—if you can help it—because their egos are already flying somewhere in outer space."

"Okay. Anything else?"

Langmore scanned Jethro up and down—and frowned. "Yes, there's one more thing. You're going to need to learn to dress better."

Jethro didn't agree with Langmore about the importance of appearance, but obliged him anyway. He bought a new black suit, jacket, and shoes; however, Jethro stopped short of wearing a tie, which he considered the most nonfunctional device ever created.

The following morning, Jethro jumped into his jeep and drove up and down the coast trying to corner each of Langmore's contacts for a brief meeting. On the way, he devised a new selling strategy, one that catered to the wealthy funders he was now going to meet. To get them to contribute resources, he offered incentives. His basic contract was simple: Give a hundred thousand dollars and Jethro promised they would attain immortality, either in their lifetimes or within a hundred years afterward via cryonics—which his organization would arrange and pay for. It was a straightforward pitch. Jethro backed his promise with legal documents that would grant donors first access to the life extension technology Transhuman Citizen planned to acquire or develop over the coming decades through its proposed investment and research arms.

After much effort, and patiently hanging out in motel rooms and bookstores for days on end, waiting for short scheduled meetings, Jethro was able to meet nearly all of Langmore's ten contacts. He usually found himself in a mansion's reception area—his appointment pushed back at least two hours—listening to other salespeople ahead of him in the next room, giving pitches for some cause or a new business. Once Jethro finally got his moment with the potential donor, he was allowed to speak for an average of fourteen seconds before he was interrupted and grilled with questions: Who are you? How did you get my info? What's in it for me? What gives you the right to ask me for money? A hundred thousand dollars? Do you realize how much money that is these days, son? Do you think it grows on trees? And everything else aside, your plan sounds like a pipe dream.

Jethro twinged in angst trying to sell his philosophy and organization to these people. It felt like selling his own body parts. This wasn't like dealing with Professor Rindall and the students at Victoria University, where he fundamentally didn't care about their opinions. He *needed* these donors in front of him. They possessed large possible value for him. But they made him out to be a jerk, a loser with another crackpot idea. Some of them openly laughed, critiquing his sales speech and telling him which parts needed work. Others told him that money rarely goes to those who wear their souls so openly. One powerful banker told him he didn't support radical groups like his, regardless of sound and rational goals. Two older donors asked Jethro where his tie was. One obese Hollywood producer wanted to know if he believed in God. Some simply said no, and didn't care to elaborate or speak to him anymore, pointing toward the door. One 72-year-old heiress with a pink feather boa and fake eyelashes—her skirt far too high, revealing grainy, knotty legs—said she'd consider it if he slept with her.

Jethro told her that he'd be back if all else failed.

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As Zoe Bach aged, her simple Asian modality gracefully matched the more distinguished, British side of her being. The result fashioned an ever stronger effect of exoticism in her appearance and a spiritual presence in her demeanor. Slight, endearing wrinkles on her face shot in different directions when she smiled, always summoning a second and third glance from people she met. Her superfine night-black hair enticingly caressed her scalp and shoulders. Her emerald eyes illuminated her aura of vivacity. In the past two years—since she had returned from Kashmir—she completed five marathons and three weeklong meditation retreats at California Buddhist monasteries. Sometimes she did them back to back. She was stuck in a flux of motion, her life streaming in many directions, with many possibilities.

She stumped her colleagues, who knew her to be independent to the point of indifference or, on rare occasions, hostility. In spite of this, she was as accepting of the universe as it was diverse, and actively practiced compassion for others in her thoughts. Her deepest passion was still reading, and she made time for books as one would make time for a special lover, her only light at night emanating from a single red candle in her bedroom. Besides the classics, poetry, and medical texts, her library was filled with books on spirituality, quantum mechanics, thanatology, transhumanism, and even witchcraft. Her apartment appeared nearly bare, except for some refined modern art and a few pieces of Scandinavian furniture.

A nurse, speaking of Zoe, recently told another co-worker, “Have you ever seen her wear makeup or nail polish? I haven’t. I just don’t think it’s the way she rolls.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. Zoe once told me that she doesn’t own a TV when I asked her about a recent episode of *Friends and Enemies*. Can you imagine that? Not owning a TV?”

In her mid-thirties, Zoe was a respected up-and-coming trauma surgeon in San Francisco. Her work schedule was much more manageable now than during her residency. Three times a week, starting at 8 P.M., she carried twelve-hour graveyard shifts at San Francisco General Hospital. But her daily professional life belonged at Cryotask, California’s largest cryonics center. It was started by a colleague whom she knew from her running club. The entrepreneur saw the movement catching on across the country and decided to mortgage his house to fund the new operation. So far it was an undeniable success, with a client list hundreds of persons long and a full-time staff of employees.

During most weekdays, Zoe was the on-call doctor, standing by in case a client died and needed to be frozen immediately. It was a procedure that legally required a licensed physician to sign off on the paperwork and to make sure a patient was suitable. Not all were. Only sterilized, intact bodies were admitted. Wounded bodies with corrupted or germ-laden cells often ended up disintegrating after cryo-freezing, rendering the process futile.

Zoe loved working at Cryotask. Life and death—and the gray area between them—continued to fascinate her and appeal to her transhuman interests. The job’s downside was the protestors. Religious anti-transhumanism groups demonstrated with pickets every day in front of Cryotask, even though the science to reanimate cryonically frozen humans was, at best, still decades away. The protestors believed tampering with death was satanic and strictly forbidden by God. Once a person was dead, he was God’s property, they claimed—to be cast into heaven or hell, but not back on Earth. To reanimate a dead person with human technology was blasphemy for both the deceased and those involved with the reanimation. Religious protestors insisted there was no room for disagreement with that idea.

To try to remain safely anonymous from radicals who opposed cryonics, Zoe Bach didn’t put a license plate on her car. Her phone number wasn’t listed in any phone books either. She chose to live high up in a skyscraper along San Francisco Bay’s waterfront, with security personnel who knew her by first name at the entrance.

“Good morning, Zoe. Long night at work?” the doorman asked when she entered the building in her scrubs. Outside, dawn was just appearing.

“Yes, Al, a long night. And yours?”

“By the looks of it, not as long as yours,” the man said, staring at her bloodstained blue pants.

Zoe smiled and nodded sleepily, acknowledging the obvious.

“Have a good one, Al.”

“You too, Zoe. We’ll keep a good lookout on your floor.”

Despite her attempts to remain anonymous at Cryotask, Zoe was discovered. She soon began receiving death threats in the mail. Her postal parcels had to be screened. Security discovered a package that contained an amateur-made bomb of fireworks. Others contained dog shit and rotten tomatoes. Zoe was even occasionally followed on streets and verbally hassled in public.

So far, cryonics clinics had only been vandalized, but never terrorized. Top Redeem Church members saw the cryonics movement growing in popularity across America and decided it was time to change that. Throwing rocks through clinic windows and harassing their employees was not effective enough. A murderous plot began churning high up in the hierarchy of Redeem Church, eventually reaching Reverend Belinas. He gave the scheme his keen approval.

## Chapter 14

“You’re just not hitting the right type of people for funding,” Preston Langmore told Jethro Knights over sushi at a restaurant in San Francisco. It was their first meeting since Jethro had returned from trying to pitch to Langmore’s ten wealthy donors.

“You’re trying to sell something that’s a damn hard sell. And you’re trying to sell to people I’ve already sold things to, who would barely buy from me. It was worth a try. But so far you haven’t found the transhuman crusaders you spoke of at the conference. You need to find them. Find that new generation of intrepid visionaries. They’re the ones the future is about.”

“Where are they?” asked Jethro.

Langmore threw his hands up. “That’s your job. That’s why it’s a new generation. But I’d begin by researching every business that has a net worth over twenty-five million dollars and was started in the past five years. Go on the Internet and check out corporation formations, tax returns, and IPO filings. Then find out who started the company. And go visit that person with your pitch. But don’t do it here on the West Coast where they’ve all been picked through already. Try the newer industrial areas, the few with any sort of action: Phoenix, Wichita, even the semi-resurgence of Cleveland. People there may still have vision—and gumption.”

Jethro followed Langmore’s advice again. A week later, after a few marathon days of research, Jethro flew to Arizona to court John Fillway, an electrical engineer and owner of Blightdale Industries. His company was a major solar panel producer and had successfully launched an IPO last year in the stock market.

From there, Jethro ventured up to Kansas to court a woman named Allivia Conway, co-inventor of the modern Lasik eye machine.

Afterward, he left for Cleveland to meet another entrepreneur, Juan Pedrosen, a Peruvian immigrant with a thick accent, who recently acquired five small tourist cruise ships. Pedrosen also founded a T-shirt company that now had factories in China, Portugal, and Indonesia. He was worth thirty million dollars and had recently given money to Nathan Cohen’s lab in Phoenix.

Obtaining even a five-minute meeting with these busy business people was difficult. If Jethro wasn’t granted a normal interview via their secretaries and staff, he would find alternative ways to talk to them. These methods included waiting for them by their cars in their company parking lots, hanging

out in front of their gyms hoping to catch them, and sometimes even interrupting them while they ate at restaurants. Eventually, he forced a conversation with each entrepreneur. Surprisingly, Langmore was right; these types of people were far more receptive. Each one of them listened carefully to his transhuman plan, some for nearly fifteen minutes, asking questions and considering scenarios.

Furthermore, Jethro was learning to be more professional and convincing. His absolute assurance of real results came through as authentic and daring, especially to people who created mini business empires by being authentic and daring. Still, no one immediately agreed to fund him, but all took his business card, promising to keep in touch as they thought about his proposal and considered his extreme transhuman ideas.

Back in Palo Alto, Jethro met with Preston Langmore again for dinner.

“So, what now?” Langmore asked curiously.

“Same thing. I’m leaving in a few days for a similar trip: Georgia, Minnesota, and Florida. Eventually, it’ll work out. Or I’ll run out of money and have to work for a while, then try it again.”

Langmore grimaced.

“Jethro, I think you should spend more time sharpening your social skills. I’ve told you this before—you need to become a more approachable human being.”

“My pitch is fine. I’ve practiced it a hundred times now. If someone likes my ideas, they’ll embrace and back them. I can’t force people to want to live forever. Besides, I already feel fine the way I am as a human being.”

“Yes, I know *you* already feel fine. But you must understand whom you’re dealing with. These people are not fully aware they want these human enhancement and immortality leaps you’re proposing—not in the way you are. You must convince them of it. You must teach them they want something they’ve been taught their whole lives to be afraid of. You must persuade them time is running out to accomplish such goals. That’s delicate work. Not exactly the foray of a bulldog.”

Jethro looked at Langmore and sighed. He cast his head back, running his hands through his hair.

“Fine. Suggestions?”

“Okay, I’ve given it some thought. So let’s do this formulaically. A three-step program. First, I want you to watch my twelve-part documentary series on the Presidents of the United States. They’re all masters of uniting the disconnected. And they do it with style and grace, often under extreme pressure. I’ve personally viewed the videos a dozen times over a decade. Watch them carefully and learn. Step two: I want you to read a book on etiquette. I’ll give you Tillerton’s *Rules of Social Etiquette*. You must learn all the rules and practice them. It’ll show you respect people’s customs, even if they’re not your own. Don’t look at me like that. Your success or failure at reaching immortality might be based on interacting better with people.”

Jethro covered half his face with his right hand. He was getting frustrated. He couldn’t see how something like wearing a tie should make any difference in whether or not someone believed he could help them achieve immortality and other transhuman aims.

“This is more important than you realize, Jethro. You can’t reach your ambitions alone. You need others. Even if they’re stuck in a culture you dislike and make a point of not participating in it.”

Jethro took a substantial gulp of his red wine.

“Come on, Preston. It’s all this social properness and political correctness that’s made so much of the human species imbecilic and nonfunctional. It’s almost as bad as religion. And for many, this sort of thing is as meaningful as religion. Does it really mean something damning because I lick my plate at a restaurant? Or use the word ‘fuck’ in formal conversation? Or go out in public with disheveled morning hair and mismatched socks? We’re a peacock species. There’s little sense to it. It’s all a harebrained carryover from the face-painting tribes of Africa, to the boorish Victorian-era conservatives, to the fashionista celebrities in Hollywood. Culture is a monster when it’s that overbearing and irrational. One gets foolishly lost in the complexity of etiquette instead of accomplishing whatever real task is at hand.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you, Jethro; however, it’s all beside the point. We live on Planet Earth. These are the playing cards you’re given. You must learn more to be a team player—and then the leader on that team.”

“But I don’t like people who join teams or who need a leader.”

“Then you’re going to fail,” said Langmore sharply. He was half standing up, pressing his palms on the table, and staring at Jethro. “Because you won’t succeed alone. The nature of accomplishing your goal requires others. And this is the only team you’re going to get.”

Jethro became quiet.

“Just think about it,” insisted Langmore.

“I’m not going to fail.”

“Just think about it.”

Jethro looked ill, but he acquiesced. He could see Langmore was deeply frustrated too.

“Okay, Preston, I’ll consider it. You have my word. I’ll start the documentary series tonight and give your etiquette book a lookover.”

Langmore shook his head, exhausted. He thought it was useless to try to socialize or compromise Jethro. His strength was exactly in the fact that he couldn’t be changed or tamed. Jethro’s ideas and actions emanated from his deepest self: a spring of exacting, unadulterated reason. It was not tainted with the monster of culture and illogical customs.

The two men ate in silence for a long time.

“What’s number three?” asked Jethro, finally aiming to move beyond the disagreement.

Sheepishly, Langmore retorted, “Okay, three. This is more discretionary. Nonetheless, I think you should start dating. You’re a loner and that doesn’t mix together well with growing an organization like yours. Getting close to someone may help smooth out your rough edges. Find someone with whom you get along, and enjoy that person. Learn from that person. Maybe even *love* that person.”

Later that night, Jethro sat in front of his computer and began watching the documentary series on the presidents. Inevitably, his mind turned to Langmore’s other suggestion: dating. Jethro went to his nightstand and pulled out the lone photo he kept of Zoe Bach. She was in dirty scrubs, talking with a team of Kashmiri nurses after successfully reattaching a villager’s shot-off ear.

Now that Transhuman Citizen and TEF were established and operational, Jethro knew it was time to make contact with Zoe. He was still wary of what she made him feel inside, how loyal he felt to her—the overriding instinct of love and bonding that often seemed in total conflict with TEF. But he could accept it now. He was ready to take that chance.

Early in the morning, after watching five hours of the documentary series, he went to bed thinking of Zoe, plotting what it would be like to see her again. He dreamt of wrapping his body around hers.

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Zoe Bach’s good friend from childhood, Jane Madiston, now living in a small town in Ohio, made the mistake of marrying an eye-candy cowboy type when she was in her early twenties. His name was Bobby MacAlister, and over a rocky ten-year marriage he proved a contemptuous jerk, whose antics and role as a husband and father got worse as the years unraveled. In the best interest of the two young daughters they shared, Jane made the grim choice not to leave or divorce Bobby. She didn’t want to break up her family, but year after year, while trying to raise her children as best as she could, her angst and disappointment grew.

Often unemployed and aimless, Bobby was recruited by the anti-transhumanists of Redeem Church. Surprisingly, he moved up the scale of power quickly in the Ohio branch. In less than eighteen months, he became a security director for the entire state. Jane was aghast.

“How can you do this—be in this stupid group?” she asked. “They want to stop all science and technology?”

“Aw, hell no, Jane. They just want to stop the crazies who aim to turn us all into monsters and who want to kill God.”

“When did you start believing in God, anyway?”

It was impossible to talk to him, she thought—like speaking to his damn oil-leaking motorcycle. She suspected Bobby only liked the group because it gave him exactly the kind of job that fit his angry, egotistical personality.

On a Friday night, when Bobby was out drinking with his co-workers, Jane discovered something he had never done before: leave his computer on with his email inbox open in a browser. Bobby was extremely paranoid about stuff like that, since his work required carrying out confidential and questionable activities. He must have forgotten or been drunk already, Jane thought.

As she went to turn off the machine for him, she recognized something on the screen in one of the email headings. It read:

#### *INFO FOR SAN FRANCISCO CRYOTASK OPERATION*

Jane jumped back, remembering that Zoe Bach worked there. Now she *had* to click on the email. What she saw shocked her:

*Bobby,*

*Surveillance shows the clinic has only one nighttime security guard. He's unarmed and often sleeps in his booth outside in the early morn. We've been doing the reconnaissance all week. It should be an easy mission. So get the ball rolling and acquire the explosive devices from the Wisconsin #4 branch. We'll be instructed by the higher-ups when the insiders need them. They'll be entering in from the basement vent, not the loading dock as first thought, so we'll need the lighter devices. Looks like the early morn of October 1st is the final go-date—when all the doctors and staff are present for the monthly maintenance session. Call me with any questions and delete this email upon reading.*

*God bless,  
John*

The next day, Jane called Zoe from a payphone and gave her all the info she could. Zoe immediately went to the police, but they refused to look into it.

“There are bomb threats directed at Cryotask all the time, Dr. Bach. What’s so special about October 1st?” asked a skeptical, overweight officer at San Francisco’s downtown precinct.

“There’s inside information this time—an email.”

“Well, get us the email, Doc.”

But Jane had chosen neither to print it out nor to save it. She felt it was potentially dangerous for herself and her daughters if she broached the subject with her husband. He was already unstable and, on occasion, abusive.

Zoe told Jane not to worry about it, and thanked her for the information. In a ridiculous way, the police were right, Zoe thought. There were bomb threats all the time at Cryotask, via letters, phone calls, and emails. What was yet another one? Still, Zoe felt different about this warning. There was substance this time: dates, evidence, and plans—if only from a childhood friend. Her stomach churned unnaturally when she considered it.

The next week at lunch, still wondering what to do about the threat, Zoe asked one of her research

colleagues at San Francisco General Hospital.

“What would you do? The staff and tanks are vulnerable in there. And the police won’t help.”

Her friend thought about it, then abruptly suggested that Zoe get in touch with a man she had met recently at a medical lecture. “A transhumanist man,” she explained, “who has just started an aggressive group to fight these types of things. Maybe he can help you. And you’ll like him too: strong, tall, well-traveled, well-read. A strange, rogue personality—like yours in a way. He might even be single. You know, Zoe, you ought to take time to date one of these days. Work isn’t everything, and you’re not getting any younger.”

“What’s his name?” Zoe asked, already knowing the answer.

“Jethro Knights.”

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Dr. Nathan Cohen was upstairs in his Phoenix, Arizona house, sleeping with his wife, when the hitmen from Redeem Church quietly parked their car in front of his driveway. It was just after midnight and the moon was absent from the sky. The three men quickly jumped out of the car and scuttled to the side of the garage. The leader—a professional kidnapper with oily hair, brown leather gloves, and a prickly goatee—disarmed the house alarm with cutting pliers, then silently picked the backdoor lock using three tiny screwdrivers. Having scoped out the house in the suburbs for four days, they knew exactly where to go, how to get into the house, and how to get out of the neighborhood quickly. They tiptoed up the stairs, then burst into Nathan Cohen’s room. Before even a shout could be uttered, the light was turned on, a shotgun was pointed at his wife’s head, and a handgun with a silencer was forced onto the scientist’s chest.

“Listen to me very carefully, Dr. Cohen. Get up. Get dressed. Then come with us. All of this is to be done in complete silence. If you cause any problems at all, we’ll kill the youngest child first,” said the professional. His eyes pointed towards a bulky man who carried a baseball bat and bore a tattooed drawing of Jesus on his forearm.

“Do you understand, Dr. Cohen?”

The kids were sleeping in two nearby bedrooms with their doors closed.

Cohen whispered calmly, “There’s no reason to wake up the children.”

Respectfully, the professional hitman nodded. “Exactly. Now let’s go.”

After quickly dressing in his sweats, Cohen was marched down the stairs and out the front door, the shotgun pressed to his back. He was pushed roughly into the car. Before it sped away, his wife was already dialing 911. But the kidnappers had disappeared before the police arrived.

In the growing hysteria throughout the country, the kidnapping event polarized the nation between the transhuman movement and the religious anti-transhumanists. The search for Cohen and the manhunt for his captors were front-page news. IMN and other television crews camped outside the Cohens’ house, speculating about what the transhumanist’s wife and his two daughters were enduring. The Phoenix police chief’s phone rang incessantly with press asking questions about the kidnapping.

Some Americans across the country thought the violent abduction was Cohen’s due. He was, they insisted, a member of numerous advisory boards of life extension organizations, the founder of a transhuman robotics laboratory, and an early investor in an organ-growing company in Seattle. Other Americans thought the kidnapping was a horrific crime against an innocent scientist.

A tiny seven-person group felt the most potent emotions; they were only eight months away from receiving experimental robotic arm transplants to the stumps they were handicapped with from birth. The lead scientist on the project was Dr. Cohen.

On the third day of the search, the kidnappers’ car was found in an abandoned industrial complex

outside the city. A small amount of Cohen's blood was confirmed in the back seat, adding fuel to the media's bombardment of the story. Finally, on the fourth day, a body—decapitated and bruised—was found early in the morning under a Phoenix freeway overpass. Later that afternoon, at the edge of a nearby park, the body's unrecognizably beaten head was thrown from a car. A child, while flying a kite, stumbled upon it and screamed. A DNA test showed it belonged to Dr. Nathan Cohen.

A bloodied, handwritten note was duct-taped to his forehead:

*We will get every one of you transhumanists. You will not live forever. You will lose your lives prematurely—and then face eternal damnation. Stop your research now or suffer the consequences. God is the only master of eternal life—and we are his messengers.*

## Chapter 15

Jethro Knights was working in his office, adding new pages to his organization's website, when his cell phone rang. He answered, and a low scratchy voice somberly announced, "Mr. Knights, this is Juan Pedrosen. I've made up my mind. I want to help your cause. I can offer a half million dollars right now to Transhuman Citizen. After what they did to Nathan Cohen, I just want to make sure the money is used to get those bastards back—to do whatever we can to make sure this doesn't happen again."

Heavy with emotion, Pedrosen said, "I can now see that you were correct about aggression and violence being a regretful but necessary course of action when peaceful means don't work."

Jethro replied softly, "We're all very saddened by what happened to Dr. Cohen. I'm deeply sorry. I know he was a personal friend of yours."

"Yes," the man said, his voice breaking on the other side of the receiver. "He was...a very good friend...and one of the few people I admired in the world."

Jethro let a few moments of silence pass.

"Mr. Pedrosen, I'm formulating plans right now about how to best handle this. Your contribution will be the seed money to fight back—and I mean it literally. I can promise you that."

"Whatever you do, just make sure everyone learns about it. We can't let them get away with this."

"I wouldn't think otherwise. You can count on a powerful and earsplitting response that many around the country will heed."

Forty-eight hours later, the money was transferred. Others also decided to give to Transhuman Citizen. Killing one's friend had that effect. In a matter of ten days, Jethro's fund grew from a nearly empty account to over one million dollars. The friends of Nathan Cohen and the new donors were not interested in funding more transhumanism research—they wanted retaliation. They wanted someone to stand up and fight back for them.

Jethro sent flowers to Mrs. Cohen, and told her how funds were rushing in after all the unsuccessful efforts of his own. He promised he would avenge her husband—that his life and death would be the impetus for a more united transhumanist front.

Over the next few weeks, a plethora of emails and offers to help Transhuman Citizen inundated Jethro's email inbox. Many at the conference remembered him now, remembered how he said this was a war. Many of those transhumanists now wanted to join and help. Some wanted to take up arms immediately, to start destroying churches and battling anti-transhumanism groups. Others wanted to terrorize the government; they felt it had neglected seriously pursuing Cohen's kidnappers. Still others wanted strikes and demonstrations organized at universities and public places.

Jethro personally answered each inquiry and offer. He spent hours each day talking on his cell phone, writing letters, and emailing those interested. He promised everyone that a concrete plan was in the works to soon avenge Dr. Cohen; that his new organization would push the movement forward with

renewed vitality and an aggressive spirit. He also told them that the best thing they could do was to keep in close touch and help him to get more donors and funding.

Despite Jethro's disdain of being socially diplomatic, he lacked no skill when it came to the diplomacy of action. Years of investigative journalism and a disciplined iron will taught him to hold his passions and emotions in close check, to remain objective. He looked like a tiger in the bush: hungry, unmoving; waiting all day, ready to strike expertly when the choice instant approached. Jethro displayed remarkable patience for a man burning inside for action. He chose for the immediate moment to concentrate on the technical happenings in his organization, and not retaliation. He knew what kind of war he wanted to wage. For the Transhuman Revolution to broadly succeed in America, much more than retribution to a horrible murder was needed. A core cultural shift was required, one in which society's outlook and its moral prerogatives were drastically transformed.

The breakdown of some of Jethro's long-term specific tasks for Transhuman Citizen was massive: lobby the government to pass pro-transhumanism legislation; widely alter opinions on how the human species views itself; aim to eradicate beliefs in religion and superstition. Jethro knew these important battles along the way must be accomplished for transhumanism to transform America and civilization as a whole. Burning down churches, antagonizing the government, and leading angry protests were not going to do much for transhumanists in the long run. He wanted a much larger platform for Transhuman Citizen than just being an agitator group, though he understood that newsmaking activism had its advantages as well. At least in the beginning, when TEF and his organization were so young and needed publicity badly. For now, however, foresight and diplomacy were top priorities.

Jethro decided to spend some of the new donor money opening an expansive office in a highly visible part of Palo Alto. He hired a reputable communications director and other needed employees. He also bought new computers, as well as media and film equipment to produce better promotional materials. Most importantly, he asked Preston Langmore for a personal favor: to find five full-time professional fundraisers for Transhuman Citizen. Langmore grinned and happily did it. Within two weeks, Jethro hired them and sent them out across the country to raise money.

“What's next on the agenda, Jethro?” Langmore asked, when visiting his new Transhuman Citizen office for the first time. “I just hope it doesn't involve your getting killed or arrested.”

Jethro smiled. “No. Not yet. I'm going to wait.”

“Wait?”

“Wait.”

“For what?”

“For the right moment. To do the exact right thing. I'm also beginning to work on international plans. Some of your hires are doing great so far, and bringing in ample new funding. I'm now planning small satellite offices in Paris, Sydney, Buenos Aires, and Beijing. And then to hire more fundraisers as well. Plus, I'm in the midst of creating an effective media machine—where we can mass produce news, pamphlets, videos, and everything else—right here in this office, on demand.”

“I've heard, I've heard. But, Jethro, what are you going to *do*?” Langmore reiterated with emphasis.

Jethro looked at him acutely, the same look that he once had while holding a pool stick in the Victoria University dormitory.

“Preston, I'm going to do something that will make Transhuman Citizen famous. But that, my good friend, is confidential. And nothing you really would want to know too much about, just in case you're implicated or arrested as well.”

Langmore grinned and said, “I knew it. I can't wait.”

“Neither can I.”

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Gregory Michaelson walked toward the revolving doors of Le Chateau, the preeminent restaurant on Long Island, where he was meeting Reverend Belinas. A sharply dressed athletic man stood near the front entrance. The color of his full attire was identical: black suit, black shirt, black tie, black belt, black socks, black shoes. A bulge near his hip showed he was likely an armed private bodyguard. Inside, Gregory saw another burly man in the same black outfit, eyes alert, sitting at the bar. The man nodded a signal, and the waiter responded by escorting Gregory to Belinas.

"Mr. Michaelson, thank you so much for joining me," Belinas said. His tall figure stood from behind an intimate table in a far corner of the restaurant, his arm outstretched for a handshake.

"It's very much my pleasure, Reverend Belinas. Is that your bodyguard over there?" Gregory pointed, animated like a young boy. He couldn't hide his awe of the preacher about whom he'd heard so much over the years.

"Yes, it is. But I would not call my protectors "bodyguards." Members of the clergy, maybe. Missionaries for the Lord, possibly. Or, as I like to call them, angels. Aren't we all?"

"Tough-looking angels," said Gregory. "Like in a Hollywood movie."

"Yes, they are. It's unfortunate that people like you and I have to be escorted everywhere. Yet, such is the nature of our work, of our mission, of *your* mission. Gregory—may I call you Gregory? You *do* believe you are on a mission, don't you?"

"Of course, please call me Gregory," he answered as they sat down. "And, well yes, I like to think I'm on a mission—doing the right thing, if that's what you mean. For the people, of course."

Gregory straightened his tie.

"Of course." Belinas smiled, quickly understanding the opposite about the aspiring statesman.

The waiter came and they ordered drinks.

The men chatted more, and after wine was served and salutations made, Belinas put his drink down and pushed it aside, saying, "Gregory, allow me to be blunt about your Senate race. You're in a dark place right now. Johnson is too tough, and I must say, without a miracle occurring for you, he's going to win the election. But miracles occur all the time, my friend—when you know the right people and believe in the right path. And, of course, the Lord is on your side."

Gregory stared at his wine glass and saw the reflection of Belinas in it.

"I'd like a miracle," Gregory whispered.

"Of course you would. Because you want to win. You have that winning quality—I can see it shining through you. You are a man capable of doing great things."

"Do you really believe that?"

Belinas leaned back in his chair, surprised. He did not expect that reply. He stared incredulously and searched to understand the young man more.

"Yes, I do. I definitely do. Don't you?" the preacher finally said.

"I'm not always sure," Gregory responded quietly, as if in confession. "The game can be...overwhelming."

Many people confessed things in front of Belinas that they later regretted. It was something the reverend had pleasantly come to expect in his line of work—and to exploit when the opportunity presented itself.

"Everything," whispered Gregory, "has just been a lot more difficult than I ever thought it would be."

The preacher smiled, pleased, thinking the candidate would be more easily formed than originally anticipated. He leaned forward and said, "Gregory, this is why you're here tonight. I can get you elected by telling my congregation in New York to vote for you. A loss here might be the end of your career, and back to being some statesman's aide or sitting by the pool with your wealthy wife, thinking about what might have been. But I can snap my fingers and give you a five-point lead tomorrow. You'll be the talk of the town—on your way up."

Gregory swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat.

"I appreciate that. And I believe you. It would be most kind if you would do that."

"Yes, it *would* be most kind, Gregory. But miracles seldom happen just to be kind to someone.

Rather they happen to those in faithful service to the Lord and his chosen ambassador."

"How can I be of faithful service to the Lord? And to you, Reverend?"

"That's why I already like you. You understand so easily. So let me continue being blunt. Gregory, you've done a decent job trashing Johnson's transhumanist inclinations in your campaign, but not nearly as much as I'd like to see. Starting tomorrow, I want you to bring your criticism of transhumanism to the forefront of your campaign. I want you to ratchet up the rhetoric against Johnson's transhumanist ties to a fever pitch. Forget all your other political ideas on jobs, taxes, healthcare, social security reform, and everything else. Johnson has you beat on all of them. But where you can win the Senate race is by discrediting him as a worthy, moral leader in the public eye. Smear him as the shady, cold-blooded, twisted idolater that he is. I want to hear how spiritually corrupt Johnson is in every speech and interview you make. I want you to bash him and his transhuman movement until your voice fails. Do you understand? Make that the ultimate rallying cry of your campaign from now on."

Puzzled, Gregory stared at the preacher for many seconds. He eventually said, "Okay, Reverend, I can do it. But why is that so important? I don't really see what it has to do with anything."

"*You* don't, but *I* do. When you win the election on the anti-transhumanism ticket, not another politician in the country will be able to support the movement without intense fear of jeopardizing their career."

"Oh," Gregory said. "Oh, I see. You want to set a national precedent."

"Exactly. And I *will* set one. So, may I count on you to help me do that?"

Gregory thought about it—and about the millions of votes the preacher controlled. Similar to a soldier obeying a command, he said, "Yes, sir. I'll do it just as you requested."

"There's one more thing I need from you, Gregory. One more very important matter to discuss," Belinas said as he looked around the restaurant suspiciously. "Just between you and me."

Gregory leaned forward.

"Once you win, I'd like you to chair the new security agency I'm forming with the President. He's left the choice up to me whom to choose."

At first, Gregory wondered if he had heard the reverend correctly. Then a merry astonishment slowly showered over him. He wasn't sure what nail-biting sacrifice was going to be asked of him, but so far, everything sounded incredible. Get elected senator, then head a major new entity his political elders would beg to lead.

Belinas watched Gregory's reaction and answered the unasked questions on his face: *Why do this for me? What makes me so lucky?*

Belinas leaned in closer. "Because I believe in you, Gregory. And so does God. He told me so. We believe you can help us do something for America that should've been done years ago."

"What do you mean exactly? Do what?"

"Help us stop the atheist scientists and transhumanists in this country from taking away our souls and from disrupting the righteous human path to our Maker. The so-called 'Transhuman Revolution' is pure evil, Gregory. It's utterly dangerous—and it needs to be stopped."

"I'm not sure what to say, sir."

"Say yes. You have what it takes to lead this country against those who plan to destroy God with transhumanism."

Instead of saying yes, Gregory's face became even more perturbed. His eyes squinting inward like a schoolboy trying to solve a complicated math problem.

"I see something in your eyes. What is it?" Belinas asked. "Something is way out of place for you. Oh yes, of course. I understand it now. You're still so innocent, so naïve. You think the transhuman

movement is a joke: a bunch of burnt-out hippies testing crazy science fiction theories.”

Gregory was careful. “Yes, well, sort of, sir. They seem so small and weak. They’re only fifty thousand strong or so. You’ve got fifty million people in your churches and affiliates across America, and another fifty million abroad, who all think you’re—”

“Who think I’m God’s instrument,” interrupted Belinas firmly. “And when you’ve seen the things I’ve seen, you’ll understand that numbers in the millions are unimportant. It’s the outliers—the few rogue individuals and their cohorts—who can cause ripples that become tsunamis. They can bring about catastrophic change to existing social systems that are stable, righteous, and God-fearing. The fact is those fifty thousand are some of the smartest on this planet, at least technically. And ten of them could take on ten million. Such is the undemocratic nature and evil of technology. But that’s not only what I’m concerned about. I’m also worried about them actually convincing the world that losing our humanity is acceptable; that it’s permissible or even correct in some twisted, idolatrous way. They teach that true evolution involves the loss of our beneficent human culture and our Christian way of life. They want not only to kill God, but also the soul of humankind and its cultural legacy. Humans should marvel humbly in awe of the Lord. But transhumanists only want to replace God with themselves and marvel at their own awe. Their final goal is to bring about a new world order, with them playing God.”

“I see. Blasphemy—the greatest sin.”

“Precisely, Gregory. Blasphemy. The one sin that can’t be forgiven. And won’t be.”

Gregory took a large sip of wine, emptying his glass. He waited for Belinas to speak.

“So will you help me? Can I count on you to be the shining knight our country needs right now? And also my good friend?”

Gregory reached to pour them some more wine. He judged poorly, however, and gave too much to Belinas. There was hardly enough left in the bottle to fill his own glass. Gregory frowned and said, “Sure, that all sounds fine, Reverend. I’ll adjust my campaign first thing tomorrow morning and increase my anti-transhumanism attack.”

“Excellent, my new friend. I knew you would be perfect for this. It’s so good to have you on my side.”

A waiter came by and Belinas ordered champagne. When it was poured, the preacher made a toast.

“To you becoming the youngest senator in a century, Gregory Michaelson. And to a long, prosperous career using the Lord as your guide—and me as your friend.”

Both men clinked their glasses and drank.

Much later that night, Belinas contacted his clergy’s leaders in New York on a conference call, saying, “Sell Gregory Michaelson. He’s the one who can help us win against those God-killers. I don’t want one Redeem Church member in New York to skip voting for Michaelson—or to vote any other way. If they do, cast them out.”

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Zoe Bach sat at her expansive glass desk, a pen and a blank piece of paper in front of her. Beyond it was a panoramic view of the San Francisco Bay through her forty-second-story apartment window. Outside, high above the ocean, sunlight pierced the drifting clouds, causing rays of light to dangle through the windowpane onto her face.

She sighed, looking at the wastebasket near her. Inside it were three crumpled-up, half-written letters to Jethro Knights. She still loved him and desperately wanted him in her life. After their romance, the few other men she dated didn’t compare, didn’t challenge her, didn’t stimulate her enough, didn’t capture her spirit. And they weren’t as mentally strong or complex as Jethro. Besides, deep inside, Zoe knew she was still waiting for him to come back to her. She believed it was fate.

Nevertheless, Zoe wasn't sure what to write now or how Jethro would respond. She wondered if contacting him over the potential terrorist attack at Cryotask was appropriate. It might push him farther away. At least she wasn't barging in on him in person at his Palo Alto office. But what if he didn't respond at all to her letter? Did she even want to know that? Could she survive that? What if he really meant never to see her or know her again?

She sat at her desk for another hour, staring at the blank page, at the bay, at the clouds, contemplating all the possibilities. She tried meditating, tried yoga moves, brewed some coffee—but still she wasn't sure what to say. The conflict corrupted her normal peace. It made her moody, vulnerable, needy.

When she realized this, she became furious. Impetuously, Zoe grabbed her cell phone and began a curt message to Jethro's personal email address. Screw a handwritten letter, she thought. If he doesn't answer or want to help me, then let him be damned. She typed rapidly:

*Jethro,*

*I received a stolen email from a friend, warning of an imminent Redeem Church terror attack on me, my colleagues, and my workplace, Cryotask. The attack is scheduled for dawn on October 1st. I was hoping you could help me figure out what to do.*

*Zoe*

She didn't proofread. Didn't edit. She just pressed "Send." The message disappeared into the void. Zoe waited, staring at the inbox on her phone like a heartbroken fourth-grade schoolgirl, she thought crossly. She wasn't sure if he would get back to her in an hour, a day—or a lifetime.

She was still looking at her cell phone screen two minutes later, lost in her memories of them together in Kashmir, when her phone beeped twice. The text from Jethro read:

*Getting into car now. You in your apartment, Cryotask, or SF General? I'm about a 55-minute drive from you, with traffic.*

*Jethro*

She beamed before her consciousness even registered it all.

He knew everything. Where she lived. Where she worked. Her new cell number—always deemed private. Everything.

Slowly, she gravitated to the obvious. The whole time he was really with her. In love with her. Watching her. Waiting. And probably goddamn battling himself, she thought.

Regardless, now she was going to face him. In less than an hour. It was that simple.

She texted back:

*In my apartment, waiting.*

Zoe thought she should get ready. Take a shower. Put on a dress. Clean the apartment. But she didn't move. She didn't want to alter her position even one inch. She just wanted to savor the sublime moment. Savor what it felt like to have someone totally aware of her, of her full existence, of her capacities, of her essence. Of the mysterious uniqueness. And to bear the weighty emotion she had carried for the years since she last kissed him, last held him, last made love to him.

Fifty-three minutes later, Jethro arrived at her skyscraper's entrance. The security guard rang Zoe, and in a skeptical voice, said, "There's a man down here, calling himself Jethro Knights, to see you, Dr. Bach."

Jethro knew by the guard's voice that a man hadn't been up in that apartment for months—maybe never.

“Yes, yes, Al. He's okay,” she said in exasperation. “Please send him up.”

Two minutes later, Jethro knocked and she opened the door.

He stood there—uplifted and grateful to be alive—watching her. Zoe stared back, her mind reeling. Her eyes frozen on him. He walked in and took her gently by the arm.

“How about sitting over there by that window?”

He led her to a small couch. She was certain his hand was floating her across the room. Surely she didn't have the strength to walk, she thought. He sat down and brought her onto his lap, holding her tightly in his arms.

Zoe thought she should say something and finally mumbled, “Was the traffic bad? It usually is around this time in the afternoon.”

“Shhh. It doesn't matter now.”

Afterward, the first tears started streaming down her face. Then a cascade. He held her for twenty minutes in silence, his own body tense and slightly shaking.

Finally, numbly, she said, “Do you want to hear about the attack?”

“No,” he said, lifting her up and walking towards the hallway. “I want to know which way it is to your bedroom.”

She almost jumped out of his arms. That was just too much. Way beyond anything that she had considered. She burst out laughing and said, “Are you kidding me? You want me to just let go? Let go of it all? Right now? Of what you did? And why you did it? And what it did to me these past two and a half years?”

Jethro simply answered, “Yes. That would be best.”

“But everything you believed. Everything you fought in us—fought in yourself. That doesn't go away for you.”

He twisted slightly. “No, not away. But to a place where it's quiet now. Very quiet. Perhaps even peaceful—in a Zenlike way you might appreciate.”

She did. Zoe sniffled and nudged her head towards the bedroom down the hall.

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The next morning Zoe Bach walked out in her white bathrobe and found Jethro Knights naked in front of the window, typing on his laptop. She flashed back to her mud hut in Kundara and thought, same Jethro.

He heard her footsteps. Turning around, he asked, “Can I get you some coffee? It's still warm.”

She nodded yes.

“What are you working on?”

“My man opening the Beijing office needs more instruction than I care to give. But, at least, he's finally locked in the lease.”

She nodded, impressed. “I've never been to Beijing. Sounds exciting.”

“Really? Want to go? I need someone to help me with the decorating.”

He brought her a cup of coffee and gave it to her with a light kiss on the cheek.

“I have offices going up on four continents, but don't have any sense of interior design that doesn't scare away people—at least, according to my staff.”

She laughed, and joked that she might consider the job.

They relished the morning together—in and out of bed. She called in sick for the first time in her life. After an intimate lunch near Union Square, Jethro said, “I have some meetings down south this afternoon. Will you let me make you dinner in Palo Alto? My apartment looks like the Line of Control in Kashmir, but my spaghetti has improved.”

After sharing a bottle of wine and enjoying dinner together, they lay naked, embracing amongst a roomful of computers, maps, and paperwork, which sprawled like the Banyan trees at Cambodia's Angkor Watt. Candles burned atop hundreds of stacked books. The flames flickered, casting dancing shadows over the countless transhumanism articles and graphs pinned on the walls. Jethro pulled Zoe closer and whispered, "I love you. I've always loved you. I haven't reconciled anything. Everything is still at odds. But I can accept it now and still pursue my transhuman dreams. I hope you understand that."

Zoe was pensive. What could she say, she thought? Her philosophy on life—easier imagined than lived—was acceptance and harmony. She had no choice but to unify it all in herself. She whispered back, "Okay, my love. Okay."

The next morning, Zoe awoke to Jethro working at his computer again. She could see that he was serious and tense. Later, after breakfast, he announced, "Zoe, I want to do something on October 1st at Cryotask that is going to be very risky. I'll need your help to pull it off. I'll do my best to protect you, the other employees, and the business, but nothing is definite. The building may be destroyed if something goes awry; however, if we can catch these criminals in the middle of their terrorist act, anti-transhumanist groups like Redeem Church are going to get a wake-up call they will never forget—a very public bareknuckled fist through the teeth. Millions across the nation will hear about it if my plan goes correctly. And it'll be the formal launching of Transhuman Citizen to the world. I might be hurt—and I'll likely go to jail—but I need to know I can count on you."

"Jail? I just got you back," she said, moaning.

"Not for too long a time, I hope."

"What does that mean? Days, months, or years?"

"I'm not sure. Less than years, I think."

She considered it, understanding his mind was already decided.

Finally, she offered quietly, reluctantly, "Okay, Jethro. I'll help you."

## Chapter 16

Despite Reverend Belinas' pull, it remained an intensely close race between Gregory Michaelson and Andy Johnson in the election for New York State Senator. In the early hours of the morning, as the last counties finished counting their votes, Gregory was declared the winner by a single percentage point. It provided a superb story for the media. They focused on one of the strongest comebacks in decades for a candidate who, only weeks before, was significantly behind in the polls. The *USA Daily Tribune* reported that, out of nowhere, unheard-of constituents in rural counties voted in record numbers. Usually apathetic, the poverty-stricken populace asserted itself and pushed Gregory Michaelson to a relished victory.

Preston Langmore and other leading transhumanists were crestfallen. They were counting on Johnson to try to talk some sense into the rest of Congress. He was one of their only government-based allies. Once Belinas got involved, however, the opportunities fell apart. Now, one of the most powerful, wealthiest states was led by an anti-transhumanist. It was another loss for the transhuman movement, at a time when it could hardly withstand any more losses.

Gregory's first days in office were a whirlwind. As such a young handsome senator, he was a constant feature on numerous media outlets. News anchors congratulated him. Radio hosts interviewed him. Papers and Internet sites ran his picture on their front pages. Many people remarked that a few productive and mistake-free years in Congress would put him on the platform to the presidency. Everything was going his way. Amanda, dolled up in mink furs, played the glamorous, smiling wife. Fashion and social magazines raced to tell their love gossip and print their pictures. The Michaels

were a sensation.

On a trip to Washington, D.C., Reverend Belinas met Gregory in the halls of the Capitol building. In front of numerous important politicians, Belinas flamboyantly greeted him, congratulating and embracing him as if he were a close, longtime friend. Gregory was thrilled—and more devoted than ever.

Belinas promised to meet with him soon, directly after a food drive in the slums of El Salvador. A week later, the reverend's secretary contacted Gregory, and a date was set for dinner at the Michaelsons' mansion. Belinas arrived in his white Range Rover, bowing low when he met Amanda for the first time. She was dressed in New York high fashion; a lacy aqua-blue dress draped across her body and revealed enticing views of her bare back. Belinas eyed her carefully, dangerously.

Dinner was exquisite: Chardonnay-basted duck with cardamom grass shoots. Desert was Li Fu-Plea, a specialty of the Michaelsons' Parisian live-in chef. Later, in the library, Belinas and Gregory smoked cigars together in private.

"Next week," the reverend said, "we're beginning to formalize that new U.S. agency. I want you to head it as we discussed. The President himself will make all the announcements when the time is right."

"Sounds fine," Gregory answered, sleepy from too much wine. "By the way, what is your role in the new agency?"

"Essential but unofficial. The President has asked that I write the directives of the new agency, and remain as the senior-most advisor. I'll monitor and guide the financing as well. We're going to have special funding."

"Oh yeah? How much?" Gregory asked, almost bored.

"For starters, a hundred billion dollars."

Gregory choked on his cigar, coughing like an amateur smoker.

"A hundred billion dollars," he shouted, glee in his voice. "That's almost the same as the CIA, isn't it?"

Belinas lowered his head condescendingly, thinking Gregory far too predictable—and not dissimilar from putty.

"Senator Michaelson, the agency I have asked the President to form is of the utmost gravity and vital for the safety of this country. I have handpicked you for it. I still don't think you understand how dangerous I view transhumanism to be. It could tear our nation apart. It could alter how we view ourselves as a society of human beings. I need to know that you understand how significant this is; that the President and I can count on you. And that you have the strength to lead us, to help build an agency from the ground up, that will become as powerful as any other in the United States. We absolutely must win the war against the transhumanists."

"I apologize, Reverend," Gregory said, regaining his composure. "Just, that's a lot of money. Like in the old days before the economic fallout. It shocked me. And, of course, you can count on me. I fully agree with stopping those people from creating monsters out of the human race and harming our American way of life."

"That's good to hear, Gregory," Belinas replied, "because your job will not be for the lighthearted. Ruthless moral strength is required. We may eventually have to use force. We may have to use violence. So far, extreme measures have worked very effectively to accomplish our goals."

"What do you mean *extreme* measures?" Gregory asked cautiously.

"There are things happening right now in our country, in our cities. Underground stuff. Nothing you need to know about yet, but it has been effective. And we plan to continue being effective," Belinas said firmly, hinting at the latest attacks on transhumanists being showcased across the media.

"We will not be dissimilar from the CIA, Gregory—in the public's eye, and out of it. There will be secrets. There will be spies. There will be covert programs and clandestine operations. We must win at any cost. Do you understand? At. Any. Cost. The security of America and the human race are counting

on us. God is counting on us."

Gregory nodded, acknowledging what he meant. He had little choice but to agree with the man who had done so much for him.

"Yes, Reverend. I understand and I won't let you down."

"That's good, Gregory. Very good indeed," Belinas said, jauntily taking a smoke from his cigar and nodding his shiny, shaved head.

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Redeem Church's four terrorists were dressed in black, armed with handguns, and wearing wire-thin headsets as they scuttled through an elaborate San Francisco sewer system directly underneath the Cryotask building. It was precisely 7:00 A.M. on Monday morning, October 1st. They picked that time because prior surveillance had revealed that the night security guard often napped then, nodding off in his booth at the end of a long graveyard shift. For the Redeem Church's murderous plan to work, secrecy was essential. Dawn was breaking outside, and Cryotask employees wouldn't be showing up to work for another ninety minutes.

The terrorists were led by a husky Romanian-born boxer named Refia Polzan. With a wrench, he unbolted the three-foot steel cover of Cryotask's ventilation system above his head. Each man looked stressed, reeling from the weight of the bombs in their backpacks, and from the off-chance that one of the bombs might prematurely explode.

In the past, bombing labs and clinics connected to transhumanism was routine: one or two explosives targeting either the laboratory and its machinery, or the operating room and its doctors. This time, however, they aimed to demolish an entire building: a three-story 1910 Victorian mansion, which had recently been converted into Cryotask's headquarters. The oversized property graced the south side of Telegraph Hill and was adjacent to San Francisco's downtown highrises. The terrorists aimed to turn the entire structure into a blistering inferno—they wanted nothing salvageable left inside. This was their largest, most dramatic terrorist attack yet.

With stealth, the four members crawled through a tight vent before entering Cryotask's basement. They needed to be quiet, just in case the armed security guard outside was awake and decided to wander inside the building. The last member, Johnny Dars, looked behind him as he closed the vent. He stared for a long time into the darkness.

"Get a move on, Johnny boy," whispered a voice from ahead of him.

Johnny shrugged and continued, but an uneasy feeling swarmed over him that they were being watched.

On the top floor of the Victorian mansion, in a nondescript storage room littered with boxes and junk, Jethro Knights watched nine silver video monitors in front of him. Each of them fed wirelessly to a remote satellite atop a nearby skyscraper. On his waist was a holster carrying a 45-caliber handgun and two loaded clips.

Jethro's phone vibrated silently.

"Good morning," he answered quietly.

"So what the hell is going on?" asked an annoyed man. He was a senior producer making the morning news at Los Angeles-based IMN. "Is this a hoax or what?"

Five minutes earlier, the producer had been tipped off by Dr. Zoe Bach to a developing live terrorist story unfolding in San Francisco.

"I assure you, this is no hoax," said Jethro. "I just need two more minutes, then I'll connect you to the live terrorist footage."

"Are you sure they're terrorists? How do you know all this?"

"I'm absolutely positive they're religious terrorists. There will be plenty of time later to answer your questions—you'll see everything for yourself in two minutes.

"What other media have you contacted?"

"You're the first so far, but we'll be streaming everything to other television stations, to multiple websites, and to network news feeds, so you won't be alone in scooping this story. I suggest doing a good job and remaining objective; this is a story of the highest national importance."

"Whatever," snarled the IMN producer, skeptical. "It just better be worth reporting on."

"It will be. You have my word. Let's talk in a few minutes."

Once inside Cryotask, the terrorists split into two groups. The first set of men began hiding timer bombs on the first floor, putting the ten-inch-long metallic devices underneath furniture in the main reception area. One bomb went behind a bookshelf filled with medical and transhumanism books. Another went under a secretary's desk. Another under a coffee table. Still other bombs went into bathrooms, closets, and various offices.

The other two men headed upstairs to the massive, unfurnished great room on the second floor, where thirty stainless steel cryonics suspension tanks were bunched together. Many of the machines were flashing green, orange, and blue lights from their digital input screens. Some were steaming and vibrating softly. Refia winced, thinking they looked like computerized coffins. He quickly began hiding timer bombs underneath the tanks and on the inside of the exposed joist beams of the mansion's ceilings. Explosions along those beams would collapse the aged structure, according to an engineer who had studied the building's blueprint plans.

Refia was in charge of setting the master timer device, whose countdown would wirelessly instruct all the bombs inside Cryotask to explode within a few seconds of each other. He eyed it carefully in his backpack each time he reached for another charge to place. It was protected in a hard transparent case, separated from the clunky bombs so that it couldn't be jostled too much.

Jethro Knights' secret video cameras were scattered in every area on every floor of the mansion. Each camera lens was nearly invisible, hiding behind a tiny hole in a hanging oil painting. The video equipment had taken days to install, but each lens had a panoramic vantage point of the space or room it was in. An additional camera was directly above Jethro to his right, filming his actions and all the images on the monitors.

In radio contact with Jethro was Oliver Mbaye, his Paris man whom he had hired a month before from the French Foreign Legion. Descended from distant royalty in Senegal, and formerly a captain with combat experience in North Africa, Oliver was extremely reserved and professional. Despite being only thirty-seven years old, his frizzy crew-cut hair was solid gray. He helped Jethro organize the Cryotask operation, advising him on all the possible dangers and outcomes that could occur. He also took Jethro to the nearby Santa Cruz Mountains to teach him how to handle and fire a handgun.

Earlier that evening, Oliver sent the regular Cryotask security officer home and took his place. Dressed in the officer's uniform, Oliver spent most of the night pretending to be sleeping in the little wooden security booth. As soon as the cameras showed that the terrorists were in the Cryotask basement, he popped through a nearby manhole in the street and bolted up the entrance vent the Redeem Church men had crawled through. They were locked in. Oliver returned quickly to his security booth, and pretended to sleep again while eying the action inside the building.

From the second floor, Refia whispered into his microphone to his subordinates, "How's it going down there? I'm about ten minutes from setting the master timer."

Johnny instantly stood upright. He was planting a bomb in one of the first-floor offices, and talk of setting the master timer was unnerving.

"We're over halfway through here on our end," Johnny answered. "Eight more charges to set. Let all these blasphemers die. This place gives me the creeps."

"Amen," mumbled Refia, who then continued setting his bombs.

The first day of every month was always the scheduled maintenance day for Cryotask, when

engineers checked each of the cryonics suspension tanks for proper functioning by running a wide range of diagnostic tests. Dr. Zoe Bach, two other cryonics technicians, and other staff were always on hand in case something went wrong. This was the reason October 1st was chosen by Redeem Church. Not only did they want to destroy the frozen bodies in tanks, but also the key employees who had helped put them there. The terrorists did not expect any survivors.

Jethro Knights telephoned back the IMN producer and said, "It's live now for you. Do you see it?" There was silence on the phone.

Five seconds later, Jethro repeated, "Can you see it?"

"Yeah, we got it. Sharp and clear. What the hell's going on? Is this real?"

"Yes, it's real. We're filming a live terrorist act at a cryonics center called Cryotask, in San Francisco, California, near the downtown district. The armed men dressed in black whom you're watching are Redeem Church members, and they don't know they're being filmed. My name is Jethro Knights. I'm the founder of Transhuman Citizen, a new, aggressive California-based organization, which promotes and protects science that extends and enhances human life. I am a transhumanist."

"Holy shit," the producer said, realizing one of the most important stories of the year was unfolding in front of him. He quickly flicked between the various video feeds Jethro was providing. One image was of the terrorists planting bombs; another was of the cryonics suspension tanks steaming; another was of Jethro standing in front of video monitors wearing a gun in his holster.

"Don't move an inch, Mr. Knights. We're putting this on—I'll be right back."

The producer jumped up and sprinted from his desk into the filming studio, waving at the IMN anchors hosting the news hour. The anchorwoman, Patricia Hayes, was in the middle of a live interview with a paparazzi journalist who had recently photographed a royal wedding in England.

"Wait, wait a second," Patricia said, looking away from the interviewee. "It looks like we have a breaking story. Mr. Denlor, I'm so sorry—we're going to have to leave it there. My sources tell me we're going live to—what's that? To San Francisco, to inside a cryonics center called Cryotask, where apparently a live terrorist plot is unfolding."

Sixty seconds later, the story began filling in to other major television broadcasters across the country that were receiving the live video feeds from Jethro. The smaller stations also caught the live footage, piggybacking off the larger broadcasters. Soon everyone, from Los Angeles to Denver to Boston, broke from their regular programming to air images of masked terrorists setting timer bombs at a cryonics clinic.

On the East Coast, the time was 10:17 A.M. Commuters on trains watched the news on mobile devices in front of them. People on the streets stared at their phones watching live Web updates. Taxi drivers blared the story on their radios. A crowd in New York City gathered near the three-story-high LED television screens fronting the buildings at Times Square. The terrorists appeared as haunting, black-clad, twenty-foot figures.

Jethro also watched the story unfold on a small TV next to his video monitors. He quickly flipped through the major cable channels following the media's responses. A wire with a tiny speaker feeding into his right ear gave him audio. The other ear was empty, allowing him to hear into the hallway, just in case someone came up to the third floor where he was broadcasting.

Around the country, television anchors described what they saw and speculated about who this armed blond-haired man was, why he was filming terrorists bombing a clinic—and why he was filming himself broadcasting it live. Occasionally, Jethro whispered quietly into a microphone and pointed towards a screen in front of him, telling the viewing audience or the television producers what was happening. He also briefly described his organization and its philosophy, TEF, a couple of times, promoting them and the promise of transhumanism to viewers. Digitally superimposed in the lower right hand corner of all the live images that Jethro provided were tiny orange-colored words: *Courtesy of Transhuman Citizen*. This was Jethro's proper introduction of his group to millions of viewers.

Zoe Bach, watching a giant flat screen television from Transhuman Citizen's Palo Alto office, sent

an excited text to Jethro's cell phone:

*Amazing! The country is watching and listening!*

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"Belinas, Reverend Belinas! You're not going to believe this!" shouted the preacher's frantic bodyguard, barging in and disturbing his solitary morning prayer. Belinas was kneeling, his hands clasped, worshiping in front of a long wooden cross hanging in the community room at his sprawling 100-acre headquarters in Savanna, Georgia.

Belinas looked up petulantly, signifying he was never to be interrupted like that during prayer.

"Reverend, I'm sorry. But something's wrong—the Cryotask operation is a set-up. It's being aired live on TV."

"Aired live? What are you talking about?"

The man sprinted over to a nearby television set, grabbed the remote control, and switched on the machine. He scrambled through channels trying to find IMN to show Belinas the story. He didn't have to—the local Savannah news channel was already airing it.

Belinas saw an image of Jethro Knights on the screen, explaining how the terrorists hoped to destroy the Cryotask building and murder its employees. The preacher recognized Jethro from the picture on his kill list. His countenance turned to shock, the peace of prayer entirely gone from his demeanor. His eyes strained to focus on the television, and words were not able to flow from his mouth. The full realization of what was occurring took far longer to register than it should have.

Finally, he shouted, "Damn it, don't they know? Doesn't Refia know they're being filmed live on TV? That it's a trick?"

"No, sir. Shall I call them?"

"Call them? From *here*, you idiot? From one of *our* phones? From the property grounds? Are you kidding me?"

"Of course. I'm sorry."

Belinas swiped the remote control away from the man. He aimed the device at the television and began quickly flipping through the major news channels. He stopped on IMN, horrified when he heard his own name spoken by Refia.

"Belinas, he's not as great a man as you think," Refia said to his partner, Brian, while calibrating a bomb. "His authority as a warrior for God has always seemed questionable to me. I don't think he knows how to really fight like we do. I mean, he's not here with us on the frontlines, risking his skin."

"Well, come on man," Brian answered, apprehensively watching his boss handle the device. "That's why he's a preacher, not a fighter."

"Yeah, but we need a Moses to lead us right now. A King David. A warrior. Not a talker. The time for talking is over. It's so over, man."

"What about the President? He's a man of God. He's against transhumanism. Maybe he's the true leader? Maybe he'll pass laws and force the issues—and get everything back on track."

"No way—he's lame too. He's just a petty politician manipulated by lobbyists and money. Besides, Belinas and him are already bedfellows. If I had the President's kind of power, I would hang all these transhumanists in public. That's the kind of leadership we need."

The IMN co-anchor chimed in to the anchorwoman beside him, "Do you think they mean Reverend Belinas, head of Redeem Church? And the President—our President of the United States of America?"

"I can't speculate on that," Patricia Hayes answered back cautiously. "That's for the authorities to

unravel.”

Only twelve feet from the news anchors—yet out of view of the cameras—the senior IMN producer began stomping his feet and waving his arms. Furiously miming with his hand over his mouth, he ordered them to *shut up*. Then he mouthed, “Don’t implicate any national leaders, you idiots.”

Nobody in the newsroom wanted to jeopardize his job or bring trouble to the station over a story as controversial as this. The country was already tense enough. And the unfolding terrorist event had the potential to cajole the pendulum of public opinion and sensibility.

Patricia Hayes watched her producer and quickly said, “Sure—so then let’s discuss the background of this Jethro Knights a little more. He’s the founder of that new radical group, Transhuman Citizen. Our sources tell us he’s an *International Geographic* man and a Victoria graduate. And if I remember correctly, didn’t he make a heated criticism, which had caused some controversy at that major transhumanism conference last year? In fact, wasn’t he the one who threw the rock back at the protestors?”

Reverend Belinas stood still, overwhelmed with shock, watching the television. He was incredulous that these things were happening. Three minutes ago he was deep in his peaceful morning prayer, one of his favorite moments of the day. Now the world was hearing his name connected to a potentially murderous crime. He yelled at his bodyguard, “Get me Senator Michaelson on the line immediately. This is going to fucking blow up!”

The bodyguard dialed, deeply afraid. It was the first time anyone had ever heard Belinas curse.

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The television news channels continued their speculation about who Jethro Knights and Transhuman Citizen were, sending their in-house researchers sprint-searching to track down as much information as possible. Each channel came up with different ideas and unique angles. Some implemented video feeds they had in their digital libraries from the 25th Anniversary Transhumanism Conference. Others aired footage from the Victoria University town hall forum. Still others spliced in images from Transhuman Citizen’s website and passages of the *TEF Manifesto*.

The term “Transhuman Citizen” quickly became the most Internet-searched name in the country that hour. The searches all led to the website of Jethro’s organization, which viewers found simple, elegant, and expedient in describing what Transhuman Citizen and its philosophy, TEF, represented. The site portrayed a streamlined direct-action group, well-conceived and aptly financed, with top executive leadership and a handful of internationally recognized scientists in support. There were offices with physical addresses all over the world: Paris, Beijing, Buenos Aires, Sydney. There were multilingual secretaries and fundraisers in each foreign branch to answer telephone calls and emails. A viewer came away impressed, convinced—believing this could be one of the most vocal and formidable arms of the transhuman movement, even if it seemed overly radical.

Inevitably, the police caught the story too. Only fourteen minutes after Jethro went live on television, sirens—first faint, then louder—raced toward the Cryotask building.

Once Jethro heard the sirens, he texted Oliver Mbaye:

*Here we go. Step two.*

Oliver texted back:

*In booth, waiting. Entrance vent locked.*

Jethro’s plan involved catching the four terrorists in the windowless, concrete basement. He assumed they would try to escape the same way they had entered once they saw police outside. Two nights before, Jethro and Oliver installed a heavy bulletproof security door with deadbolts at the

entrance to the basement. All Jethro had to do was quietly follow the terrorists to the underground room and lock them in. The police could take care of the rest. The bombs weren't scheduled to go off until the employees arrived, so there would be at least an hour to collect and dismantle them—or throw them into the nearby San Francisco Bay.

Everything changed when Jethro, watching his monitors, saw Refia reach into his pocket and grab his vibrating cell phone. The terrorist was surprised to see his brother's caller ID on the screen. He knew his brother would only call at that exact moment for an absolute emergency. As soon as Refia answered, the voice began shouting madly at him.

“They know! They know fucking everything, man!”

“Huh? Calm down, bro,” whispered Refia. “What are you talking about? Why are you calling me right now? You *know* what I'm doing.”

“Look behind the painting in front of you, brother.”

“What?”

“They're filming you do this, Refia. At Cryotask.”

“Calm down. Are you drinking again? What are you talking about?”

“Just look. Behind. The painting. In front of you,” the man said, desperately trying to control himself.

“Look behind the painting? Hold on.”

Refia walked up to the Monet knockoff and examined it. He poked his index finger at a tiny tube flush with the canvas, gradually realizing that it was a micro-camera lens. He lifted the painting and saw wires leading into the wall.

“What the hell?”

“Do you see now? It's a fucking hidden video camera!”

“Jesus Christ. How do you know this?”

“It's live, I'm telling you. The whole thing is on TV. I'm watching you right now—holding the painting up. Looking at it with your crooked teeth. There are cameras all over the place. I'm watching Johnny, Brian, and Diego too. All of you are IMN headline news.”

“That's insane!” Refia exclaimed, flabbergasted.

“I know it is. But still—the whole country is watching you, man. The entire building has live hidden cameras everywhere. There's that transhuman guy, Jethro Knights, inside the building somewhere. He set you up, man. He can even hear this conversation. *Everyone* can hear this conversation. *I'm* hearing you talk to me on TV. It's crazy.”

“You're insane.”

“No, man. The entire country is watching you. They're *hearing* you talk about the church. About the boss. About everything.”

“You've got to be fucking kidding me,” Refia said, shooting paranoid, furtive glances around the room. He slowly realized the magnitude of what was occurring.

He ran over to a television hanging on the wall and switched it on. A few seconds later, when the picture came into view, there he was on Channel 2, San Francisco local news. Bold red headlines ran across the screen: *Live Breaking News*. The anchorperson was speculating about whom the caller speaking with the terrorist might be. Then the broadcast cut to Jethro Knights in a small room on the third floor, his weapon pulled.

“Oh my God,” Refia hissed. A moment later he faintly heard a police car with its sirens sounding. Then another. And another. Until the noises became so loud that he knew they were only about half a block away and coming for him. He ran to the nearest window and saw six squad cars rushing up the street. Behind them was a SWAT team in a black courier van. Within seconds of parking, uniformed men bearing shotguns and automatic weapons drained out of the vehicles. Officers rapidly cordoned off the street with yellow “caution” tape and began throwing burning flares onto nearby sidewalks. Police car lights flashed everywhere. News vans were also arriving. Reporters jumped out and ran towards the

scene with cameras and microphones.

“What can I do?” Refia shouted into the phone, backing away from the window and pulling out his handgun. “We have to escape.”

“No, man. He’s locked you in. The vent is bolted closed. He’s planned it all.”

“Who?”

“That Jethro Knights guy. From Transhuman Citizen. Don’t know who they are. It doesn’t matter. He’s just some damn transhumanist. But you’re locked in and surrounded.”

There was silence on the phone—a profound reckoning began to occur.

“You won’t be able to escape, Refia,” the brother said finally, solemnly hinting at something ominous.

“What can I do?” Refia asked. As he watched himself on television, however, he already knew what needed to be done.

His brother whispered, “You know what to do, bro. You’re with God now. You wage His war. And protect His glory. Remember the training?”

“Yeah, I remember,” Refia answered quietly, reluctantly. He thought about the covert Redeem Church terrorist training camp in Wyoming, and of the arduous six months he spent there, preparing.

“Good, then finish the mission. May God’s infinite might and peace be with you.”

Refia looked at the phone, mumbled farewell, and hung up. His brother was right. Refia stood up straighter, a man newly determined. He tore into his backpack and removed the master timer from its case. He stuck the device on top of a cryonics tank and re-calibrated it for ninety seconds.

Moments later, Jethro received a text from Zoe Bach:

*They know. Exiting. Doubt u can catch them in basement.*

A hidden video camera was just able to view the red numbers on the digital screen of the master timer. It showed eighty-three seconds left. Then eighty-two, eighty-one, eighty, . . . and downward.

A second text came through from Zoe, only ten seconds afterward:

*No! Wrong! Suicide. Re-timing bombs. 73 sec ONLY. Get out!*

A third text broke in from Oliver:

*Get out of building NOW, Jethro! Suicide!*

Jethro’s phone rang. It was Preston Langmore. Simultaneously, another call came in from Zoe. Jethro couldn’t answer or look at his phone anymore. There was no time. He took a final glance at the monitors to see where each terrorist was, then cocked his gun and launched himself out the bedroom door, towards the stairs.

In front of the Cryotask building, police bearing bullhorns yelled at spectators and neighbors congregating on the sidewalks: “Clear the street! Bomb blasts are imminent! Clear the area immediately!”

People hurried back inside their homes or ran away down the street.

Refia’s backup man, Diego, who had heard the whole phone conversation between the brothers, lost his nerve when he saw the master timer tick to sixty seconds remaining. Afraid to die, he turned and flew down the stairs, abandoning the mission. He kicked open the front doors of the Cryotask building and sprinted outside. He was met by a cluster of police officers with drawn guns. A sharpshooter on the SWAT team shot him in the left knee as he ran towards the sidewalk. Diego yelped and fell to the ground. He gripped his leg in agony.

The terrorists on the first floor, Johnny and Brian, didn’t know about the phone call from Refia’s brother. Confused, they watched Diego dash past them out the entrance and get shot. It made no sense. Their instincts told them to quickly retreat to the basement. While they were running across the house they yelled at Refia on their headsets, asking him what the hell was going on? Johnny and Brian looked at each other in panic when they found the basement vent locked tight.

Forty feet directly above them, Jethro Knights descended from the third floor with incredible speed, jumping four steps at a time. He held his pistol in one hand and his cell phone in the other. But

on the landing of the second floor, a gun exploded—and a bullet whizzed by his head. It caused him to misjudge a step, and he tumbled into a wall, dropping his handgun and phone. His weapon landed four feet away from him. He lifted himself up to grab it and heard a fuming voice in front of him.

“Touch your piece and I’ll shoot you in the face.”

Jethro looked up and saw Refia pointing the barrel of a .38-caliber revolver directly at his head. The terrorist was only three feet away from him.

“You must be the bastard who did this,” Refia said.

A text from Langmore beeped and came through Jethro’s phone:

*30 seconds! Get out NOW!*

Refia walked over to Jethro’s gun and kicked it down the rest of the stairs.

“Your fate is sealed with mine. You’re going to die here and meet God. He’s going to judge you and send you to eternal hell with all these dead freaks, whether you like it or not.”

Jethro Knights stood up straight and focused on Refia, scanning the man up and down. Then Jethro’s lips formed a hearty, mocking grin. “Oh, I’d like that. I’d like very much to meet your god. And you’re wrong about the dead freaks.”

Jethro’s reaction and answers caught Refia by surprise.

“Huh? What do you mean, you’d *like* that?”

“Because if I ever met your god, and it had the audacity to judge me and try to send me to your make-believe eternal hell, I’d kill it. I’d kill it mostly for being sadistic, but partly for being unimaginative. And no dead freaks are going anywhere. The three frozen patients that were here got moved out quietly last week and shipped out of state. No one gets held here too long; the earthquake danger of this city is too risky for long-term cryonics storage.”

It took a few seconds for Refia’s mind to register this startling new information.

Eleven, ten, nine, eight, . . .

“Well, then what the hell are all those tanks doing up there, steaming and flashing lights?”

“They’re empty and in storage, owned by transhumanists who haven’t died yet. And fully insured as well, should anything happen to them. Apparently, your superiors didn’t notice that before they assigned you this mission. Quite short-sighted, wouldn’t you say?”

“Oh, you son of a bitch,” yelled Refia furiously. He cocked the trigger of his gun and prepared to shoot.

In that moment, many of the bombs on the first floor began detonating in a cacophony of explosions. Parts of the floor they stood on ripped apart and burst into flames. The blasts caused Jethro and Refia to be thrown into each other. The men instinctively latched arms and began wrestling. Each tried to headbutt the other. Refia freed his right arm and punched first, landing a fist on Jethro’s ear, which caused him to yelp. But there was no time to fight—the building swayed, ready to collapse. Both men could hardly keep their balance. Around them more explosions went off, and masses of wood and stone started to crack and fall on them.

Knowing there were only seconds left to escape, Jethro pushed hard off Refia and took a huge lunge towards a window ten feet away. Refia tried to grab him, but missed. The terrorist’s other hand lifted his gun and fired twice. One bullet missed widely, but the other grazed Jethro’s shoulder. Before Refia could get off a third shot, he was rocked by the erupting bombs on the second story, causing a fireball to sweep over him. Refia fell backwards, screaming, swallowed by a pit of twisted blazing wood and collapsing walls.

The window in front of Jethro was still an opening to the outside, but its shape was contorting and closing with every step he took towards it. He felt like he was climbing a hurling mountain of debris. Fresh air, sunlight, and safety were now only four feet away. The last of the bomb blasts brought him within two feet of the shifting, cracked window. Heat and flames singed his hair and clothes. He made one last push to dive through the jagged glass, his left hand covering his face, his right hand pulling himself through the window sill. Around him, the building raced downward, collapsing on its

foundation, glass splattering everywhere. Massive amounts of crushed wood, piping, and drywall jettisoned in every direction.

Jethro's dive threw him twelve feet into the air before he crashed onto a stone path outside. Warped building materials littered the ground. Behind him, a plume of black smoke hissed from where the house once stood, and a broken gas pipe accentuated the fire, torching the ruins like a flamethrower.

Viewers all around the country held their breath. Many television stations caught the entire sequence on air, first using Jethro's inside cameras, then using cameras from news vans scattered outside Cryotask. It took almost a minute for the dust to clear from the demolished site. Near where the front entrance had stood, the shot Redeem Church terrorist was apprehended and handcuffed by police. Fifteen meters away, Jethro Knights limped from what was now a gigantic blazing inferno. Oliver Mbaye and a handful of policemen and firemen rushed to his aid, helping him to walk. His left ankle was visibly hurt, and a sizeable wound on his abdomen was bleeding heavily. Otherwise, he only had some scratches and one large cut on his right cheek. He refused to get into an ambulance, but accepted gauze for his stomach wound. A fireman carefully led him to a squad car, pushing reporters out of the way when they tried to interview him. Jethro quickly got into the back of the vehicle. The captain of the police force jumped in right next to him. A sergeant, waiting in the driver's seat with the car running, immediately took off and drove them to the downtown police station.

"I hope you don't mind the limelight," were the captain's first words to Jethro as they departed the chaotic scene. "Because after that stunt, you're famous."

## Chapter 17

At a San Francisco police station, Jethro Knights was brought into an interrogation room with bright lights and a large, shatterproof, one-way viewing window. Inside the room were three chairs and a steel table. A nurse came in, gave Jethro some pain medication and bandaged his stomach wound. After she left, two local detectives in gray suits entered and introduced themselves. They were friendly, explaining that the interview was a standard and necessary procedure. They were careful not to insinuate Jethro was guilty of any crime—they just wanted information.

Jethro listened politely, but then told them they were wasting their time, and that they were going to be called off the case any minute.

"What makes you think that?"

"Trust me—this is a matter for some very high-up politicians."

"Whatever," one of them muttered, not sure whether to believe Jethro. "Let's continue with the questioning."

Ten minutes into the interrogation, the police captain knocked and entered the room. He bent down to the senior detective and whispered something in his ear.

"Well, apparently you know something I don't, Mr. Knights. Someone special, with presidential authority, will be coming to question you. We've been ordered to cease our interview," said the detective.

Jethro waited in the room alone for three hours. He was still filthy from the explosion. The gauze on his stomach turned partly red, and he clenched his fists to counter the aching. The painkillers the nurse had given him weren't strong enough. Finally, he heard voices and commotion outside the room. Then a man entered. He was dressed in an ebony suit and a light blue tie. His Italian shoes were more than a thousand dollars apiece. He carried a folder of paperwork and tried to look resolute, but only managed to appear apprehensive.

"Hello Jethro."

"Hello Gregory."

Senator Michaelson walked toward the corner of the room, checked his cell phone, then turned it off. Afterward, he looked carefully at the four cameras on the ceiling above him. Every word was being recorded, every inch of space videoed. He would have to be very careful, he thought to himself. He cleared his throat.

“How long has it been?”

“Since the last day of philosophy class at Victoria,” answered Jethro. He knew Gregory had not forgotten.

“Yes, of course. A long time ago.”

Gregory sat down, put his right elbow on the table and let out a deep sigh. The senator was fifteen pounds heavier since the two classmates had last met, and softer from years of fancy meals and high living. A few gray hairs poked out of his head, more the result of a burdensome marriage than a busy professional life. Jethro, on the other hand, looked nearly the same as seven years before, only more masculine. He was robust and fit from endless laps in the pool and long jogs in the Palo Alto hills. He was bronze from his California lifestyle, and his arm muscles bulged out of his shirt. Gregory realized he was no match to physically brawl with Jethro anymore, even if his opponent was wounded. He bent his head down and gazed at Jethro’s stomach injury, which was soaking blood through his shirt.

“Are you going to be okay? Has a doctor seen that?”

“A nurse has. It’s nothing for you to worry about.”

Gregory glanced at Jethro, dubiously raising his eyebrows. But then the senator’s eyes returned to the wound. Inevitably, he became nauseous. Gregory was never himself when it came to the sight of blood. It had always made him queasy as a child when he fell and cut himself or saw others scraped up. He still had a rough time getting yearly flu shots. Even though he had always wanted to watch the needle puncture his own skin, he was unable to.

Gregory turned his eyes away from the injury and said, “Jethro, I’d like to help you. I really do. I can, you know. But you’ve involved yourself in something very complex. Do you understand that?”

“What are the charges? And when does the court hear it?”

“Charges? Why even talk with an old classmate like that? There are no charges right now.”

“Then let me go free.”

“Jethro, you know I can’t do that. This is very serious. You’ve fooled with some very big fish—and their reputations. You’ve roped them into your live media trap and they are not happy. They want to be quickly extracted from this mess. You can do that by going on the record and downplaying any misconceptions.”

“Why waste seconds of my life with stupid requests, Gregory? You know I won’t do that.”

“Jethro, be reasonable. I’m here by order of the President. Do you understand? The President of the United States—the most powerful man in the world.”

“Anyone who swears on a Bible to get inaugurated into his job doesn’t qualify as powerful to me. Especially when it’s a former trial lawyer who does it.”

“For Christ’s sake, Jethro, don’t be like this. Just like you were ten years ago in class.”

“You’re wasting my time. You should leave now.”

Gregory was appalled. He forgot what it was like to deal with someone so unreasonable, so unyielding. If people were like that in Washington, D.C., nothing would ever get done, he thought.

“I’m trying to help you here. This is your life. And it’s going to be made miserable by us.”

Jethro smirked, saying, “We’ll see about that. Do your best—and I’ll do mine.”

“Your best is going to be spending the rest of your days in prison. Can’t you see that?”

“No, I can’t. Especially not before the whole world knows Reverend Belinas and Redeem Church hired a bunch of thugs to murder innocent law-abiding transhumanists. And if I find out the President or you are involved, I’ll do my best to bring down his presidency and your seat on the Senate.”

Gregory squinted, shooting a quick glance at the window where a half dozen people were watching. “You must be crazy,” he retorted. “That’s outrageous. There’s no proof of that at all.”

“Then why are you so scared? Why come down here personally to California, sweating it out on a jet flying at full speed from Washington, D.C.? Or were you playing golf in Arizona? Or sailing your daddy’s rickety pile of splinters off the Hamptons?”

“This is a matter of national security, Jethro. And you know who I am now. That’s why I’m here.”

“Sure. You’re here to carry on the fight against transhumanism, which helped win your Senate seat for you. And which your pal, Reverend Belinas, convinced you is at the core of the nation’s best interests. I’ve read the damn newspapers, Gregory. What I really want to know is exactly why you’re so afraid of it? Why so much fear about being transhuman?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve never been completely against transhumanism—there are just ethnic and religious imperatives to consider and respect.”

“Transhumanists don’t hinder ethnic or religious people from reaching their supposed immortality. So why the hell should ethnic and religious people be able to hinder transhumanists from reaching their immortality?”

“Come on, Jethro. For everyone’s safety, life extension and human enhancement science shouldn’t travel at light speed like you’re proposing it should.”

“If it doesn’t happen rapidly, then it’s not going to do anything for you and me—or for anyone else alive right now. We’ll all be dead first.”

“What’s so wrong with that, Jethro? Our children will figure out how to handle transitions like that, handle power like that. Maybe our grandchildren. And, hopefully, they won’t mutate the species into something crazy and nonhuman. You know the dangers of artificial intelligence, of cyborgism, of cloning, of bioengineering. It could trigger apocalyptic events in civilization. We wrote papers on those topics.”

“I’m not afraid, Gregory. What prompts alarm in me is how you and your government want to ruin not only the potential of this country, but also the path of those who are going to transition into more advanced beings in search of immortality and omnipotence, and maybe even participate in a great singularity. These advances are going to pass, one way or another. And your current second-rate moral system—your weak, pretend-God-will-take-care-of-us bullshit—is a waste for our species’ possibilities. You people want to pretend that democracy, religious inspiration, and unbridled consumerism are going to last forever and carry us all to bliss; that the American Dream is right around the next corner for everyone. You spend hundreds of billions of dollars on lazy welfare recipients, on mentally challenged people, on uneducated repeat criminals, on obese second-rate citizens bankrupting our medical system, on murderous war machines fighting for oil and your oligarchy’s pet projects in far off places. All so you maintain your puny forms of power and sleep better at night. Well, I’ve got news for you: Sleeping isn’t going to exist in fifty years. Do you understand what I’m getting at? The changes are going to be utterly dramatic. Utterly pervasive. On every level of our existence. And your lies and rules are no longer enough for the new guard nipping at your heels. A fresh nationwide morality will soon seize the future—a more capable system of ethics and power ideology.”

“No way. You’re absolutely wrong, Jethro.” Gregory quivered, distraught. “What we are right now is enough. The nation doesn’t need a new morality. We don’t need people to change. Humans are fine just the way they are.”

“The bold code of the transhumanist will rise. That’s an inevitable, undeniable fact. It’s embedded in the undemocratic nature of technology and our own teleological evolutionary advancement. It is the future. We are the future. Like it or not. And it needs to be molded, guided, and handled correctly by the strength and wisdom of transhuman scientists with their nations and their resources standing behind them, facilitating them. It needs to be supported in a way so that we can make a successful transition into it, and not sacrifice ourselves—either by its overwhelming power, or a by fear of harnessing that power. You need to put your resources into the technology. Into our education system. Into our universities, industries, and ideas. Into the strongest of our society. Into the brightest of our society. Into the best of our society. So that we can attain that future. We don’t have a day to spare for you to make

those changes. The promise is too great.”

Gregory pulled away from the table. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re insane, Jethro. Totally insane. Shall we stop all help for the poor, for criminals, for the mentally challenged, for the sick of the world, for developing nations that need us? Just to fuel transhuman goals? Because you think the promise is so great?”

“Mostly, and brutally, yes. We need to divert the resources to the genuinely gifted and qualified. To the achievers of society—the ones who pay your bills by their innovation, genius, and hard work. They will find the best way to the future. Not the losers of the world, or the mediocre, or the downtrodden, or the fearful. They will only drag us down, like they already have.”

“You’re evil, Jethro.”

“Don’t pretend to me that you don’t know what I’m saying. You haven’t fought for a damn thing in your life. It’s all been handed to you. Nonetheless, you still feel far more superior and entitled than others—than the little people you feign concern about.”

Little people, Gregory thought, stunned. How the hell could he know that?

“But mostly, Gregory, don’t pretend to me that you give a damn one way or the other. For you, this is about politics, and your ego, and your dinner parties, and what others think of you. For me, however, this is about the future. The transhuman future that I want to be a part of, that I want to exist in, that I want to thrive in. And to reach my full potential: the invincibility of the omnipotender.”

“Mortals shouldn’t act like God, Jethro.”

“Yes, they should. And more importantly, they shouldn’t be afraid to try.”

Gregory shook his head in exhaustion. He lowered his eyes and stared at the table in front of him. Inevitably, he was drawn to look again at Jethro’s bloody stomach wound. He didn’t know why he had to see it once more, but he did—and it made him sick. He didn’t want to understand any of what Jethro was saying nor want to discuss it anymore. For a moment he wasn’t sure who was crazy.

The senator abruptly stood up and walked tensely around the room. When he came to a stop, he saw the camera above him, aimed right at his face. It helped Gregory to focus, knowing others were watching and supporting him, knowing he wasn’t alone to face this transhumanist.

“Look, I’m not here to discuss philosophy with you, Jethro,” Gregory said sharply. “You’ve contributed to the demolition of a building in a major U.S. city where people have died. I’m here to figure out a game plan. We want you to go on record as saying this was all done by some rogue militia group in Ohio, where it all started with Dr. Bach’s childhood friend.”

“Bullshit. It came all the way down from the top—from Reverend Belinas. I will make sure the whole world knows it.”

“No one will believe you. Such a spiritual man as Reverend Belinas would never be privy to such petty things.”

“You heard what his thug said on live TV. I’m not taking back a statement of one of his very own terrorists. My tech people can trace phone calls, emails, bomb purchases, anything. We’ll nail him—and maybe you too.”

“You’re insane. You can’t take on America, Jethro.”

“Not America, Gregory. Just the idiots and the anti-transhumanists in America.”

Senator Michaelson was aghast. He didn’t know what else to say or do. It was astonishing that Jethro wouldn’t cooperate at all.

He stood there in silence for a long time, and then said, “This is your last chance, Jethro. You will lose this war against us. Prison will be a dark, lonely place.”

“I’ll remember you said that, Gregory—when it’s my time to stick you in one.”

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After Senator Michaelson left the interrogation room, guards escorted Jethro Knights out of the police station and across the street to the county jail. He was placed in a solitary confinement cell. Behind the bars in his concrete cubicle was a stainless steel desk, a toilet fused into the wall, and a skimpy torn-up mattress on a bedframe bolted to the floor. The desk held a Bible and a three-inch yellow pencil for making notes in it.

Exhilarated and elated with the outcome of the terrorist incident, Jethro paced around his cell, considering his organization's next moves. The visit from Senator Michaelson was tremendous; it proved how deep the impact of the bombing had cut into both the government and the public. Jethro decided to channel his anxious energy into writing an article. He knew all the major newspapers would want to publish it in their op-ed sections. Without any blank paper, he sat down, opened the Bible, and began writing the article between lines of scripture. The page began with:

*Matthew 13:15*

Today, America has witnessed where their

*For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their*

churches and government have led them: down

*ears dull of hearing, and their eyes they have*

a fool's path, where terrorists threaten innocent

*closed. Lest at any time they should see with*

lives while revealing their own corrupt, boorish

*their eyes and hear with their ears, and should*

leadership. Today, the transhuman movement has

*understand with their heart, and should*

made a united and confrontational stand, declaring

*be converted, then I shall fully heal them.*

it will no longer allow the hindrance of its scientific aims.

Jethro's article went on, spiritedly describing the new defiant face of transhumanism after the Nathan Cohen murder. It promised that transhumanists would never compromise their goals for as long as Transhuman Citizen existed. It also announced a bold call for radical new groups to emerge and join the transhumanist plight—promising that a brighter future for the movement was now dawning. The *USA Daily Tribune* published the article the following day, after a sympathetic jail guard brought the torn-out Bible pages to Zoe Bach. The printed article added clarity to the transhumanism debate and hype unfolding in the media.

Forty-eight hours after the bombing, Jethro Knights was arraigned—his wrists and feet bound by metal cuffs, his body clad in orange attire. His shirt read, *Inmate 132*. He chose not to be represented by a lawyer. Behind him were Zoe Bach, Oliver Mbaye, and Preston Langmore. In back of Langmore was an attorney from the World Transhumanist Institute.

“I know Jethro dislikes lawyers,” Langmore said to Zoe. “So I brought ours, just in case.”

After preliminary discussions in the courtroom about jurisdiction and other legal technicalities, the judge—a squat man with gray hair and a forceful, badgerlike sense about him—asked the prosecutor if Jethro Knights was being accused of any crime. The judge found it odd that there was case paperwork in front of him, but no charges. The prosecutor, whom the judge had never met before, brought up documents bearing the Presidential Seal stating that under a new Homeland Security decree, the government could detain criminals for up to ninety days without a charge, as circumstantial evidence was gathered.

“Huh?” said the San Francisco judge, surprised—then instantly turned irate. “What is this, the Gestapo? When did the standard seven days of a Presidential Seal turn into ninety days without congressional approval? We’re in a courtroom in California. The last time I checked we were still following the Constitution, the law of the land.”

The prosecutor looked threateningly at the judge, “Your Honor, I suggest treading lightly, very lightly. This is a Presidential Seal. The upper echelons of the government, including the United States Attorney General, have no tolerance for anything but the strictest law being followed when it comes to domestic terrorism suspects, as we consider Jethro Knights to be.”

The judge stared back in astonishment. Five seconds later, he abruptly stood up, bent over his desk, and turned ferocious. This was his bench for the past twenty-five years and no one had ever threatened him in his courtroom like that.

“Domestic terrorism, damn it? This case looks cut-and-dried to me, sir. I’ve spoken at length with the San Francisco police captain and our local district attorney about what happened. I’ve read dozens of reports from different official agencies. I even watched what happened on live television. I unequivocally deny the charges of his being held as a domestic terrorist for ninety days.”

The prosecutor stood abashed. He was not used to the ways a loud, liberal San Francisco judge handled the arraignment. He blurted out, “But, Your Honor, this order has the Presidential Seal.”

“Yeah, and this is an American courtroom, first and foremost. Orders—regardless of who issues them—don’t trump law. Don’t forget son, I’ve been on the bench a long time. I’ve seen presidents come and go, some of whom were forced to resign with their tail between their legs when the law was broken.”

The judge stared hard at the prosecutor, testing him, unafraid.

The prosecutor turned to his partner, a CIA man who bore a callous countenance and wore a dark suit. They whispered to each other until the man grudgingly shrugged his shoulders.

“Your Honor, seven days will be acceptable,” said the prosecutor meekly. “We request that time to determine if there are any charges to be brought against Jethro Knights regarding the Cryotask bombing.”

“*That*, you gentlemen may do. But the day someone comes into my courtroom telling me what I can or cannot do, when it’s not within the scope of the U.S. Constitution, I will quit my job and leave this great nation. You have seven days to drum up reasonable charges and evidence against Mr. Knights, or I will free him.”

Oliver Mbaye and Preston Langmore snickered at the about-face the prosecution was forced to make. Moments later, a police officer led Jethro Knights out of the courtroom and back to his cell. Jethro eyed Zoe Bach as he was escorted away, nodding to her that everything would be all right.

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Four days later, the President of the United States held a special evening press conference that was broadcast live on television, radio, and the Internet. It was a deliberate government attempt to ease the

escalating tensions between the transhumanists and the religious anti-transhumanist groups. In the seventy-two hours following the Cryotask attack, dozens of spontaneous acts of violence had occurred nationwide—many at cryonics companies, human enhancement clinics, and transhuman laboratories. Television stations aired live, incendiary footage of a robotics research facility and an embryonic stem cell center being torched by angry religious mobs. The attacks were countered by transhumanist youths burning down a handful of churches across the country and vandalizing an NAH satellite building in Tampa Bay, Florida. The NAH building was spray-painted multiple times in bright orange with the words, *Courtesy of Transhuman Citizen*. Clearly, the stage was set for a national standoff.

At the press conference, bearing his patented cool demeanor, the President asked the nation's citizens to calm themselves, to control their emotions and angst. He blamed recent events partly on the media, and how they mishandled and misrepresented stories. He extolled them to be judicious with the news, and to stop sensationalizing it. Mostly, though, he spoke of the problem of aggression across the country as being an economic issue.

“If people had jobs they would be more reasonable, more tolerant. We could progress through these challenging times in peace and unity.”

After five minutes of speaking and meandering on the country's woes, it was clear the President's special address was leading to something bigger—an important announcement. Blogs had recently reported a rumor that the government was imminently launching a gigantic new agency to remedy the animosity brewing across the country. What exactly for, no one knew for sure.

An IMN news anchor broke in on the speech by saying, “Viewers, I feel he's coming to something. Perhaps this is what the impromptu press conference is really about.”

The President stared into the camera, his eyes intense.

“My fellow Americans, these are arduous times. Without jobs, without peace, without common resolve, we are finding ourselves more at odds with one another than in many decades before. After much thought, I've decided to address the issue directly, with a massive new presidential decree that will facilitate us on all fronts. I'm not acting alone. Under the advice and bipartisan support of many congressional members and governors around the country, I'm creating the National Future Security Agency—the NFSA, as many people will come to call it. Its mission will be to understand the challenging and rapidly changing issues that science and technology have created in our lives, and to lead us through that understanding with sane principals and ample national security using protective government oversight.

“Perhaps as importantly, it will also provide the country with tens of thousands of new jobs. Jobs that cover a wide spectrum of society: from secretaries to senior directors; from health officials to social workers; from researchers to task force agents. The new agency will be launched with unprecedented amounts of funding to assure the safety and peace of this country, and helping it to take its place among the other great establishments of this nation, like the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

The President continued, discussing at length the future of the NFSA and how it would consume the National Association of Health, as well as numerous other government organizations, thus creating a behemoth of federal administration. He promised the new construction of impressive headquarters for the agency and better, more compelling ideas and strategies on moving the country forward through challenging times. He also assured the people that fair, legal, and unbiased investigations of the terrorist attacks across the country, including the Cryotask bombing in San Francisco, would be completed. He implored citizens to take caution in their reasoning—to not make villains heroes, nor heroes villains. It was an obvious allusion to Jethro Knights and the ongoing question by many Americans and the media: Why was he still in jail when he had helped disrupt a terrorist act and likely saved the lives of numerous innocent people?

Near the end of the press conference, the President introduced Senator Gregory Michaelson as the man whom he was appointing to oversee and chair the new National Future Security Agency. At the

podium, Gregory graciously praised the President for his wisdom to launch workable solutions that both protect people and offer new jobs for them during the prolonged recession. Gregory revealed that one hundred billion dollars would be used to create the new agency. There were gasps from the reporters in front of him, many of whom immediately shot their hands to the ceiling, salivating with questions.

Around America, the surprise news conference worked. Analysts throughout the media applauded such a strong reaction to keep the country functioning smoothly. Excitement stirred in many citizens. The edgy national milieu was in dire need of something with daring and impact. People peered inside themselves and decided they still believed in their government; that perhaps the nation wasn't so lost. That perhaps the outbreak of anger and chaos—what some considered a possible prelude to civil war—was just small, manageable pockets of discontent. The strong, persuasive words of the President and Senator Michaelson soothed the American psyche, which longed for a day with more jobs and less national conflict.

## Chapter 18

Jethro Knights spent the next days writing furiously in his jail cell, mostly from his tiny bed, letting his stomach and ankle heal. The warden eventually gave him books and a notepad, but nothing else. There were short daily visits from Preston Langmore, Oliver Mbaye, and Zoe Bach. Now that Zoe couldn't spend her days at Cryotask, she became a liaison for Transhuman Citizen, working from its Palo Alto headquarters, trying to handle and channel the explosion of the organization's popularity. She kept Jethro informed of the important news: Seventy million people had viewed the website; television news shows constantly speculated on the details of his imprisonment; a full investigation was launched into Reverend Belinas' involvement with the bombing.

"There's widespread confusion at your headquarters," Zoe said to Jethro—steel bars separating them from each other in the inmate visiting room. "One day the main glass entrance had rocks thrown through it. The next day hundreds of dollars worth of flowers were put in front of it. We've seen the name "Transhuman Citizen" painted on trains in Eastern Europe, burned into college football fields in Kansas, and written in twenty-five-foot letters on Ayers Rock in Australia. There have even been reports of hats with the TEF infinity logo on them in China."

"Hats?" Jethro said. "I like that." He enjoyed watching Zoe animated.

"Transhuman Citizen has become a rallying cry for anyone who has problems with religion, big government, and the backward state of the world. There are groups claiming ties to Transhuman Citizen popping up everywhere around the globe. It's like wildfire."

"There's also a horde of people who want to meet you. Multimillionaire entrepreneurs from Japan. Scientists from Brazil. Philosophers from Norway. Artists from Thailand. The unread email tally in your inbox is insane. It's like you've launched something people want to win, even if they don't really know why or how."

Jethro nodded. The plan was working, albeit recent formation of the National Future Security Agency was a major worry; otherwise, everything else was blossoming. His main concern was how to best capitalize on it all. For starters, meeting with the new donors and entrepreneurs was essential. Transhuman Citizen was going to need money—as much money as it could garner. Jethro also wanted to begin confronting the nation's inadequate educational system as well as the consumption-promoting mass media, and attempt to change them into forces that facilitate people gaining transhuman-oriented perspectives. As gargantuan as it was, he believed the task was essential to bring about lasting cultural shifts in America, so that people deeply desired evolutionary advancement—not millennia-old religions, nor the latest new flashy car from Detroit.

But perhaps most exciting of all—now that there were resources to draw upon—Jethro wanted to fund and support the science: endless amounts of life extension and human enhancement research at innovative, ultramodern facilities. He couldn't be sure what best path to pursue for transhumanism—he thought machines and downloading consciousness bore the most promising 100-year future—but everything possible should be included in the interim.

“Of course, getting out of here,” Jethro told Zoe, “is my first priority.”

Back in his jail cell, Jethro considered what criminal convictions Gregory Michaelson might attempt to cast at him. With Zoe Bach’s written testimony in court hands, where she insisted that the police ignored the terrorist threat she had initially reported, there wasn’t much they could get him on. Luckily, much of the media was still defending his actions too.

Inevitably, on the seventh day, upon the San Francisco judge’s orders, Jethro Knights was escorted out of jail and freed. The politicians in Washington decided it was too difficult and politically dangerous to legitimately prosecute him for anything. Jethro held a news conference on the steps of the courthouse. Even though a scar worked its way across his cheek, and a small limp was still noticeable when he walked, he appeared strong and cogent to the dozens of reporters and camera persons on hand. Wearing the new white dress shirt Zoe had bought for him—with its sleeves rolled far up—he created the impression of a striking, avant-garde revolutionary ready to take on America and its religious conservatives.

Directly behind Jethro—in clear view of all the news cameras—was a twelve-foot-long banner held up by transhumanists. Painted in bright red letters, its message read:

*MATHEMATICAL FACT: The amount of life hours the United States Government is stealing from its citizens is a million times more than all the American life hours lost in the Twin Towers tragedy, the AIDS epidemic, and World War II combined. Demand that your government federally fund transhuman research and nullify anti-science laws. The average human body can be made to live healthily and productively until age 150.*

With microphones thrust inches from his face, Jethro passionately began his short speech. He promised the viewing public that he would help find the originators of the Cryotask terrorist mission and punish them accordingly. He also promised to keep the search alive for the killers of Dr. Nathan Cohen. And to fight back against the new terrorist attacks that were happening daily across the nation to transhumanists. He warned that no militant anti-transhumanism groups were safe against Transhuman Citizen and other radical life extension and human enhancement organizations anymore. Jethro concluded his speech by criticizing the launch of the NFSA, warning citizens that the government and their new super security agency were neither to be depended upon nor trusted.

“In fact,” Jethro said, “the NFSA should be seen for what it is: a massive infringement of people’s individual freedoms. It’s the new stronghold of religious America—its best attempt yet to keep you from reaching your maximum lifespan and potential as an advanced entity. Of course, it’s also another tax burden this nation doesn’t need. The government has run this country into the dirt. And now they will stop at nothing to preserve what unconstitutional power they’ve achieved in the name of security. We, at Transhuman Citizen, won’t let them get away with it. They’re as much the opposition as are the anti-transhumanists with their medieval philosophies. We must band together and start a superior nation, a superior world, with our eyes set on the future—with improvement of ourselves, in all respects, as the most urgent goal.”

The media quoted and replayed the speech often. The end of the weeklong news spectacle was finally culminating. Jethro’s cell phone continued to go off non-stop. He put his newly hired secretary, Janice Mantikas—a hard-working, middle-aged Brazilian woman whom Preston Langmore handpicked for him—in charge of it. The donation account on the Transhuman Citizen website reached nine figures. Tens of thousands of people around the world had made contributions, from one dollar to one

million dollars. Finally, Jethro thought ecstatically, there would be resources to pursue his stirring ambitions.

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Reverend Belinas telephoned Senator Michaelson from his headquarters in Georgia a half hour after Jethro Knights was released from jail. It was their first communication in three days. Gregory was in Upstate New York on senatorial business.

“You sure this phone is clean?” squawked Gregory.

“Of course it is. This is my personal line.”

“Well, after the Cryotask debacle, one can’t be sure anymore.”

“It’s clean, I said. Now listen. How do you feel? I saw you on the front page of the *USA Daily Tribune* again today. You’re right where you want to be.”

Belinas heard Gregory sigh.

“I’m not so sure of that. Leading the NFSA can work both ways. There are so many things to consider now—so many possibilities of a misstep and taking a nasty public fall. Besides, New York has its share of problems too. I’m only human with how many hours I can dedicate to everyone and everything, you know.”

“Well, that’s power, Gregory. Get used to it.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” whimpered the senator, clearly unconvinced about the benefits of so many new responsibilities in his life.

“Okay, the first order of business,” Belinas said, abruptly changing the subject. “We need to get him! We need to break him, this new transhuman superman in California. He can’t just be let off the hook. Are you sure you can’t charge him with anything?”

“Him? Huh? What are you talking about? Who?”

“Come on, Gregory. He’s one of the devil’s own—Jethro Knights.”

“Jethro? No, he’s just an antisocial asshole. He always has been, even when I knew him in school. Besides, technically, we can’t get him on anything. He didn’t really commit any crime. We had to drop our only charges: trespassing and carrying a weapon. His doctor girlfriend had a note giving him permission for both on Cryotask property.”

“There must be something else we can do to nail him.”

“There’s not. Trust me, our lawyers tried. Besides, look at the news. We run the risk of putting a hero in prison. He told me personally that he’s trying to connect you and the President to the terrorism. There’s already an ongoing investigation into you and your church that I’m trying to smother right now. And let me tell you, it’s not easy. People are asking a lot of questions. You need to temper your feelings. It’s just not worth it right now.”

Reverend Belinas shut his eyes for a moment, angered by his lack of reach. He forced himself to say, “Okay then, but we need to watch him closely and try to get him in other ways. I’m sure he’ll have security around him all the time now.”

“No way, Belinas!” Gregory said sharply. “Using dubious means is not the answer right now. Let’s just leave the transhumanists alone for a while, and concentrate on building the NFSA instead. Work on the big picture. The President doesn’t need more heat. Neither do you and I.”

Gregory sighed again, his voice drained. “I have to go and take Amanda to a public function. My jet is waiting. I can’t get dragged into all your spiritual grudges. I only got four hours of sleep last night.”

Gregory was beat. Belinas knew better then to pursue the matter now. He backed down, muttered some generalities, told Gregory to stay healthy, and then hung up.

Inside, the preacher was livid. His anger had been growing for days. But pushing Gregory at this moment was not the strategy for defeating the transhuman movement. The senator was still only a puppet. The immediate strategy for the reverend was to personally achieve more power. Left unchecked, Belinas knew transhuman science and technology could unravel the course of humanity. It seemed amazing to him that others didn't recognize the profundity of that possibility and treat it accordingly. Belinas needed more power so he could use the NFSA to increase pressure on the transhumanists, to make them live in the unwanted and unproductive state of war and fear.

The preacher walked outside his headquarters and crossed the driveway to his impressive seven-story church, which resembled a cathedral. Inside, he knelt down in the pews. He was alone. He stared at a life-sized crucifix overlooking a giant white marble altar. His hands were spread apart, aggressively gripping the bench in front of him. He focused his mind and began strategizing new ways to implement his war. Most importantly, he needed the U.S. President to give Senator Michaelson, the NFSA, and him more resources and legal control to fight the transhumanists. Once that happened, Belinas decided his primary aim should be to lead the new agency to entirely outlaw the field of transhumanism—to make it criminal to be a part of the science and the movement in any way. Just like Jethro Knights believed with his philosophy, Belinas knew there could be no middle ground.

The preacher brought his sweaty hands together, bowed his head, and promised God that he would find a way to make these things happen.

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The morning after Jethro Knights' release, Zoe Bach drove him to his Palo Alto office. Hundreds of roses and other flowers were placed near Transhuman Citizen's front entrance. A pack of supporters waited near the glass doors, facing off with a crowd of anti-transhumanists bearing pickets and signs. Three policemen standing near their motorcycles tensely observed everyone.

Jethro looked at Zoe and said, "So, this is what you've been going through every day."

She laughed, her hair covering half her face. "Today isn't so bad. We'll park in the back and enter through the rear. It's safer back there."

They drove around to the backside of the building. Inside, twenty-five staff members—most hired in the past week by Zoe on Preston Langmore's recommendations—were looking through paperwork and sitting behind computers, drinking coffee, waiting to finally meet Jethro. They were website designers, publicity directors, communications specialists, fundraisers, business strategists, accountants, secretaries, scientists, and technology experts. Jethro called a meeting and began it by asking everyone to introduce themselves and to explain their backgrounds. He listened carefully and made mental calculations about each employee as they spoke.

When they were finished, Jethro explained to them the organization's main goals and the importance of their work for the transhuman movement. He ended his short speech with a warning: "Lastly, before you get back to your tasks this morning, I want to make it very clear to everyone in this room what is to be expected from you. If you are not a net positive, here for the mission of Transhuman Citizen, then I will fire you. I will aggressively fire you. Laggards and slackers are not a part of this group. This is more than an organization, more than a paycheck, more than a job in the life extension and human enhancement world. This is a vision—a revolution in transhumanism and beyond. Believe in it, contribute to it, help build it. That's what I expect of you. Now get to work, and over the next few days, I'll sit down with each of you and formalize your personal strategies."

Jethro's plan was determined by efficiency. He treated his organization like a startup company injected with the fervor of a militarylike campaign. He paid his employees—and paid them well—to do what he hoped they most wanted to do in life: something that directly helped each of them reach

immortality and reap the rewards of transhumanism.

It wasn't easy. For the first few months, before the Cryotask bombing and Nathan Cohen's murder, there was little for Jethro to do but write, try to disseminate his ideas, and search for funding. Now that there was money—and employees working for that money—he was responsible for directing the hires to be productive. It was a novel experience for Jethro. He tried to draw on the diplomatic lessons Langmore had pushed on him, but he still found many moments agonizing. Jethro preferred to leave workers to solve problems and create successful outcomes themselves. Yet, the interruptions at his desk and the knocks on his office door from employees asking inane questions were constant.

"Phillip," Jethro impatiently told the Web developer, "I can't monitor every bit of content on our seventy-five-page website. Choose for yourself what goes in that corner and what color it is."

"Jennifer," Jethro sharply said to the science team's secretary, "you've been here two weeks. Don't ask me about vacation time yet."

"Frank!" Jethro roared into the phone during a call to one of his fundraisers in Denver. "Never bother me again with your hotel room bullshit. Figure out another place to stay—or quit. You're falling behind quota anyway, and I can easily have you replaced."

Despite the rough-edged origins of the organization and the menial dilemmas Jethro faced, Transhuman Citizen still grew quickly. Its staff doubled and Jethro rented more office space in his building for the new employees. The content of the website grew threefold. Life extension videos, articles, and interviews were created. Jethro started up a new transhuman magazine called *Transhumanist Monthly*. He gave lectures around the country about his organization, always searching for additional support and backing. He assembled transhuman demonstrations in public, coordinating events with other transhumanist groups around the United States and abroad. He ran commercials on local radio and television stations about the promise of life extension and human enhancement. He defended scientists when they were harassed, using Transhuman Citizen supporters to protest face to face against anti-transhumanist protestors.

For the first three months, donations and pledges continued to grow, and Jethro continually bumped up his efforts to fight for his goals. But privately, he was disappointed, sensing something deeply troubling with his progress. He noticed that people everywhere listened with excitement to the urgent transhuman message of his group, but that most of them fell far short of wanting to make real changes in their lives. People, it seemed, even the scientists capable of making transhumanism succeed, simply wanted the world that Jethro spoke about to exist. They didn't want to build it or fight for it; it was risky and far too much work. Jethro concluded that it was an uphill battle. Progress was slow. Too slow.

Still, he worked like a machine, often laboring past midnight in his office. Zoe Bach helped him whenever she wasn't at the hospital performing trauma surgery. During late January, Zoe flew with Jethro to every foreign Transhuman Citizen office, formally opening each one with welcoming events and announcements in local newspapers.

The foreign offices were picked according to a strict formula. They were always small—only two or three rooms—but set in a busy, prestigious building. They were staffed with few people—mainly communications professionals, some fundraisers, and a multilingual country director. The offices were decorated with the same spartan modernity Zoe chose for the Palo Alto headquarters. Inside, automation dominated. When visitors walked into one of the offices, no one was immediately there to meet them. Soon, though, a soothing androgynous computer voice came through a sound system in the wall, welcoming the visitors, asking them to sit down, and letting them know that a live person would soon be out to greet them. A robotic tray carrying refreshments wheeled itself out, offering coffee, tea, and fresh fruit.

Zoe had convinced Jethro to create as futuristic an environment as possible, and to stay with the same theme in all the offices. The furniture looked like it was pulled out of a science fiction movie set. Subtle lighting illuminated when a room was entered. Intriguing postmodern paintings were picked for

the reception area and main conference rooms. Interior design photojournalists came and published stories about the offices, lauding the originality. Jethro marveled at Zoe's creativity and talent for design, loving her more than ever.

After a few months, everything was complete; the international offices, websites, media materials, and the magazine were all linked to the Palo Alto headquarters. Jethro Knights announced that their outreach and ability to dish out mass media—even current international content—had come of age. Now it was time to use those resources to reach a broader swath of society and start turning ordinary people in America and around the world into supporters of transhumanism.

Jethro's other immediate goal, the one on which he had spent the most hours working, was to court the super-rich. They were the most affluent people on the planet—the top one percent. They controlled over half the Earth's wealth and resources. These were the individuals Jethro needed most. With their money he could launch the next and most important phase of Transhuman Citizen: to directly create and fund radical and large-scale life extension research projects.

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Jethro Knights was in a race. Reverend Belinas worked tirelessly to secure more power and resources to stop transhumanism, and he was increasingly successful.

A pivotal moment for Belinas arrived when America's First Lady, a cheerful obese woman, collapsed while attending a presidential fundraiser for her husband's political party. In the hospital, she was diagnosed with advanced heart disease and immediately underwent emergency bypass surgery. The bypass was successful, but the doctors discovered her left ventricle was barely functioning and damaged beyond repair. Additional bypasses were risky, as was a heart transplant. Doctors discussed the possibility of an artificial heart to keep her alive for a few extra years, but she refused, saying the idea didn't fit well with her vision of natural living or with her personal religious perspective. No other treatments were viable. One of the world's top cardiac experts predicted her time alive was limited to twelve months or less.

As her health continued to worsen, and she became more sedentary, the U.S. President increasingly turned to Reverend Belinas for faith and spiritual guidance. The preacher used the opportunity to grind into him how insane it was that tens of millions of public dollars were still going towards transhumanism ideas—like the creation of synthetic brain neurons, human bionics, and genetic cross-species engineering. Instead, he argued, it could all be going towards tackling the country's worsening health trends, such as heart disease.

"Heart attacks are the most common form of death we have in the United States, Mr. President. Yet, I can't understand why we don't put more of our federal health budget into preventing it and into other ailments like the common flu, which kills thousands every year. Our government still manages to partially fund wacko transhuman scientists looking to download their brains onto computer chips. And it costs us many millions, while your wonderful wife and a hundred thousand God-fearing Americans like her lie there suffering and dying. Education, prevention, and wholesome faith-filled lives are the key to getting our country healthier."

Even though the amount of government funding going towards transhuman science was less than one percent of the national public research budget, the President agreed to fully terminate it. New forms of transhuman science were not urgently needed, he conceded. All public money should go directly to preventing and curing the basic maladies tormenting society, like heart disease, cancer, influenza, autism, and obesity. He signed over billions of dollars more to expand the ever-growing and far-reaching operations of the NFSA, diverting the very last of the money still going to scientists treading the careful line between transhuman research and mainstream health sciences. Now everything was

relegated to basic health education and general medicine via the siphoning power of the NFSA.

Jethro Knights called it asinine. "You don't spend money trying to fix obesity," he said. "You spend it creating a novel drug that eliminates food addiction, so people with no control don't overeat every day and night. The same with cancer: cures have been elusive for fifty years; it's time to put tens of billions of dollars towards the creation of a universal vaccine. And heart disease? Don't spend money fixing the heart and its valves. It's a complicated, trouble-prone organ to begin with. Spend it on developing a totally new nanotechnology-inspired mechanized replacement." Artificial organs are the way of the future, Jethro believed. Not ethics, nor education, nor preventative healthcare inspired by 2,000-year-old religious mores. This was the government being utterly irrational and wasting money again, what little they still had left. The U.S. federal deficit compared to its GDP was the highest in eighty years. Furthermore, the government had raised income taxes three times in the past decade, exacerbating economic malaise for all its citizens. In all probability, America was spiraling downwards towards bankruptcy.

Jethro wondered for the first time if trying to succeed in America was the best way to proceed with transhumanism and its life extension goals. Maybe the forces here were too overwhelming, too stupid, too laborious for success. Maybe the soil of America was incapable of growing a lasting transhuman movement. Maybe the grand plan included doing the research elsewhere—in a faraway place where real science could be accomplished, unhindered by anti-transhumanist groups or an improvident, cash-strapped government. Maybe there was an isolated place on the planet where such an autonomous nation of transhumanists could be founded. Maybe, Jethro thought, he should leave America behind and go find that place.

## PART III

### Chapter 19

Over the past year, Amanda Michaelson increasingly grew impatient and dismayed with her husband and his lack of personal strength. Even though Senator Gregory Michaelson appeared exceedingly successful in his life, she knew he wasn't. She saw him as he was: a puppet. Unfortunately, divorce, or even estrangement, was out of the question for someone of her class—at least from her father's weighty point of view. But she no longer felt any love or respect for her husband, which even in the beginning of their marriage was minuscule. Everything had been handed to him, she thought, through either her connections, or dumb luck, or because he was easy to use. He refused to take anything of his own and make something audacious of it.

Even during his own senatorial campaign, it was others who had won for him. She stood by his side—the trophy wife—smiling, waving to crowds, nudging him forward, insisting he try harder to work longer hours and avoid sleeping. She thought if she were a man, she'd already be running for the U.S. Presidency, and sure to win it.

Amanda even tolerated the trivial affairs she knew Gregory had with the younger nobodies in his Washington, D.C. work scene—so common for politicians these days, she thought condescendingly. Their sex life was never satisfying anyway; she was thankful he rarely bothered her with his libido. But power, as her father always taught her, was essential. And preserving that power was the single most important item for her in life and marriage.

She knew Gregory wouldn't be able to preserve any power once he lost his usefulness or luck. He would pull her down with him in his fall, most likely in complete embarrassment and disgrace. Amanda frowned thinking about it. She sat on her Norwegian pickled oak lawn chair at the side of a four-leaf-clover-shaped pool, tapping her shiny red fingernails against the wood. It was late morning on a

Tuesday. She was in her bikini, sunning at her father's vacation mansion in Virginia. She sipped a martini, watching gold handrails penetrate the aqua-blue water of one of the clovers.

The butler hurriedly came outside to her and whispered in a British accent, "I'm so sorry to bother you, Mrs. Michaelson, but there's someone here to see you. Someone important, I believe."

She looked at the servant, then towards the French doors on the pool's veranda. Reverend Belinas was meticulously telling the maid how he wanted his Scotch.

Afterward, the preacher walked towards Amanda. When he reached her, he bowed low, took her hand, and kissed it softly. They had met many times before, but this was their first time alone, without Gregory's hawkish presence.

"Oh, what a wonderful surprise," Amanda said gaily.

She got up slowly and put on her white lace robe. Belinas eyed her blatantly, grinning. A rush of sexuality caught them both.

"I didn't know how exquisite you were, Mrs. Michaelson," Belinas said, never one to speak lightly.

Belinas was not an unattractive man, Amanda thought—albeit his baldness and exotic complexion were peculiar. He was similar to the Portuguese army captain in whose embrace she had once spent many summer nights of her late teens.

"How nice of you to drop by, Reverend Belinas. I'm sure you know Gregory isn't here. I'd love to offer you a drink anyway and steal away some time with you alone."

Reverend Belinas' life was incredibly public. The press—his own and others—followed him nearly everywhere. Little was ever reported about the women in his life. Even though he could have courted women and married according to his religious dictates, he chose not to. He never entered relationships or was caught in compromising moments. He considered himself above sexuality. On occasion, however, it stung him—like now.

"I've already put in my order," he replied coyly, watching the maid walk out with his drink. "And please, there's no reason to refer to me as 'reverend' right now, especially as I'm about to enjoy a drink with a beautiful woman on a hot summer day."

The maid, eying the preacher suspiciously, handed him his Scotch and walked away.

"How is your drink?" Amanda asked, smirking. "Just like at home?"

"Better," he answered, sipping the drink provocatively.

"And where exactly is home for you these days? I know it's not that sprawling compound of yours in Georgia."

"You're right, it's not," he retorted, softly tasting his drink, swirling it slightly in his mouth. "My home is everywhere and nowhere."

Amanda wasn't satisfied with that answer, but she knew it wasn't wrong either.

"I believe you make your home wherever you are," she stated, beginning a loaded conversation.

Belinas swallowed and pulled the drink from his mouth. He turned to her, blatantly observing her again: the long lines of her body; the lacy robe covering her thin shoulders; her perfect curvaceous breasts—the recent creation of one of the best plastic surgeons in the country.

"That seems the best way," he answered, "especially when there are so many wonderful places out there to call home."

"If I had to guess, I'd say your real home is power, Belinas. But where exactly does that live?"

It was Amanda's turn to deliberately toss her eyes on him. She cast them up and down the length of the man, examining carefully without caution, imagining what bounty was under the white robe. He nodded slightly, knowing she liked what she saw, knowing why she was looking. They both relished the process.

"I would normally answer: For a preacher, his power lives with his people. Since I know you better, and know you're smarter, I'll just answer: It lives with its beholder, and it's a home in itself."

She grinned and clapped animatedly. She made a small intimate step towards him. "Well said. I think you're precisely right. Would you mind going to my fool husband and sharing your wisdom with

him? He could damn well use it.”

The courtship dance halted for Belinas. The word “husband” was like a dagger in his cranium. He felt the sexual edge in him rescind, the fuel in his groin ooze away, the world around him instantly deflate. He looked carefully at Amanda and knew he didn’t have time for her. Or for the hundreds of princesses like her, bored and desperate to tangle with anything colorful, stirring, and shimmering. He turned off the attraction and returned to his purpose.

“Ah yes. Sweet Gregory, who would’ve preferred never to have left his fraternity house in college. I actually *did* come here to talk to you about him.”

They walked into the shade and sat down at a glass table overlooking the pool and gardens.

Amanda sighed. “Well, what can I do for you, Belinas? Regarding him, that is.”

She regretted mentioning Gregory now. Their moment was ruined. At least for the time being, she thought; however, she looked forward to what he wanted to say or do with her husband.

“It seems that you and I have mutual goals,” Belinas began. “And let’s just say Gregory’s a means to those goals. But lately, I find him far too casual, given his elevated position. He is, simply put, too affable. And lazy too.”

“All agreed, especially the lazy part.”

“I wanted to come to you personally and give you some suggestions on how to motivate him. I think he needs...special encouragement.”

Amanda bent closer, liking where this was going.

“What exactly do you mean, Belinas? Special encouragement?”

“I mean he needs to wake up and focus,” the preacher said firmly, almost threateningly. “He needs to get out of his cotton-candy dream world. Stop holding up progress. He needs to embrace the tougher, darker sides of human behavior to help others get to the light.”

Belinas looked at her inquiringly to make sure he wasn’t pushing too hard.

“Go on, Belinas. I’m perfectly fine—and still listening.”

“I can’t tolerate his casualness and inefficiency much longer before I ask the President to have him replaced as the head of the NFSAs. And that would be a great shame, because if Gregory would just do his damn job, he’d be in line for the White House next.”

“Belinas, you didn’t come to me because you thought I’d disagree or think differently. Tell me what I can do, and I will do it. He’s a fool. So talking to him won’t do much. I’ve already tried for five depressing years.”

“I’m sure you have.”

“Well, what then?”

“Something much more extreme. I want you to threaten to divorce him. Tell him you’ve already talked to your father about it and are discussing logistics with an attorney.”

Amanda sat back carefully in her chair.

“That’s quite extreme,” she said, taking a slow sip of her martini, a sinister look manifesting in her expression.

“We need him, Amanda—not as he is, but as he can be for us. Tell him he can keep you if he gets rid of the intern girls, the football game watching, the fraternity poker clubs, the boozing parties, the entire nonfunctional social world that loves him for doing nothing with himself—for being a playboy on my dime and my creation. Do you think the leaders of the transhuman movement are doing that night after night? Do you think Jethro Knights is doing that? Gregory is a senator, for God’s sake, and the figurehead of the NFSAs, which is my brainchild. I aim to make it one of the most powerful institutions in the world. I don’t want him to spoil its value at the best time ever to make it grow. At a time when it’s so needed. We might only get one chance at this. It could become its own branch of the government, its own power source. Anything.”

“Or the military arm of the Church of Belinas.”

The reverend smiled smoothly, calming himself, distancing himself from his passionate words. He

shook the mostly melted ice in his Scotch.

“Crudely put, but not that far off,” he replied. “That’s why I like talking to you.”

Amanda stared into the distance, her eyes following an airborne hawk searching for prey.

“Okay. I’ll threaten him the next time I see him. Shall I have a lawyer draw up some preliminary paperwork for a divorce?”

“Sure, but don’t freak him out. Just enough so he listens better and gets his head back into the game. And for Christ’s sake, get him a personal trainer that forces him to exercise. He’s getting fat—at least fifteen pounds gained in the past year. He’ll be obese by next year if he continues at the same pace. Maybe enroll him in a boxing class or Jiu-Jitsu. Something to get him to bleed sometimes, knock a few teeth out of that pretty-boy face. We need to awaken the darker side of his soul.”

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After a year of living with Jethro Knights in his Palo Alto apartment, Zoe Bach asked him whether he wanted to have children. They were having dinner at a small Vietnamese restaurant. Jethro stopped eating, appearing perplexed. Zoe’s question was dangerous and trying.

“I’ll admit, I’ve thought little of it—at least not in a personal way. The implications of immortality and children seem incredibly complicated. Just like love, but worse. Besides, I thought you told me you weren’t sure you wanted children. That made the whole process of returning to you simpler.”

“Simpler? What the hell would *complex* be then?” She shook her head incredulously and continued eating.

He started eating again too, waiting for her to speak. But she held her silence long enough to become disconcerting. A minute later, Jethro pushed away his half-finished plate, and picked up his beer.

“Okay, what’s up Zoe?”

Over a week had passed since they last ate an entire dinner together away from the office, just in each others’ company. Jethro’s schedule was hectic.

“When I said I wasn’t sure about children, we were in the middle of a war zone, you were noncommittal, and I was still in residency. That was nearly four years ago—an eternity in many ways.”

Jethro frowned. “Would you mind just saying what you really want to say?”

She smiled broadly. “As you wish. My period is late.”

Jethro remained very still, his lips slightly open. He let ten seconds pass before adjusting himself in his seat and answering, “Really?”

“Really.”

“What would you do if you were pregnant?”

“What would *you* want to do?”

“I asked you first,” Jethro insisted.

She waited patiently, not willing to play his game.

He sighed, acquiescing. “Okay, fine. I’d want to do what you’d like to do. But in general it would seem odd, at least philosophically, for an immortalist like me to have offspring. Especially right now. Let’s assume I’m going to accomplish living thousands of years; then having a child this moment, at the very start of my life, may not be practical—or a rational example of transhumanist conduct. TEF will forever alter social structures, once it grabs hold and another half century passes. The hierarchy of society in a digital age and whatever comes afterward will be irrevocably changed. Men and women probably won’t mate anymore. Sex drives will be controlled or eliminated by a pill. Male and female traits will likely be merged into a single, androgynous entity. The whole idea of having offspring may become entirely obsolete. Don’t you think?”

“Jethro, I’m not asking whether having a child is going to be obsolete in fifty years. I’m asking about whether you want one today. Or, more precisely, in just under eight months.”

“It’s a philosophical question, my love—a philosophical dilemma.”

Zoe winced. “Ugh! You know, I don’t think like you. I don’t fight the whole world and all that is happening to me every second of the day. Or always ask philosophical questions first. Or classify myself as something I hope to be someday. Usually, I just feel my way through wherever I am and regardless of what is happening, even if it seems frightening or the future is uncertain.”

“Ah yes, how the enlightened are.”

She snickered back in response and then became serious, saying, “I would like to have our baby if I’m pregnant. But only if you support that decision.”

“I’ll support any decision you want to make. I owe you that after how I left in Kashmir.”

“Jethro Knights, I want more than to be owed. This is also about you, the father.”

“Of course. I didn’t mean it like that. Give me a moment and I’ll rephrase it.”

Jethro took a swig of beer, then another. This was causing him immense stress and Zoe knew it. She watched, amused. Waited.

“Okay, here it is: I think it would be incredible to be the father of a child. Amazing, curious, and fun. And to have one with you, given how much we love each other and how we make each other feel, sounds like bliss. It’s a very real responsibility, however, and not one that is always compatible with the core ideas of my philosophy, TEF. Or the goals of immortality and transhumanism, which are self-serving and based on reaching a very different reality than the present world we live in.”

“Whoa! Imagine that. The man can say what he means. His arsenal of weapons is gone.”

Jethro frowned. Only Zoe could touch him like this—leave him raw and exposed—and still be so endearing.

“Come on, I’m kidding,” she added. “Okay, let me address what you said. Your TEF and transhuman ideas are just that—ideas. Wonderful, crazy, and accurate as they may be. But having a baby can be self-serving too, and in a multitude of ways.”

“I agree with you. Yet, when it comes to a child and the multi-year commitment—just like our love—the ideas can go from black-and-white to confusing gray shades very quickly.”

“We can worry about all the gray shades later, when we encounter them.”

“You mean we can throw dice at the universe. For eighteen years.”

“Yes, precisely. And probably for much longer than eighteen years. It can take well over a decade to go from undergrad to medical school to a good residency program.”

Jethro grinned. “Okay. I agree, as long as we understand it’s dice.”

“Baby, your transhuman aims are dice as well.”

Jethro twisted, battling his disagreement and saying slowly, “Yes, it is. For now. But I’m trying very hard to make it less and less the case, so that one day it’ll be a controlled science. Everything will be like engineering skyscrapers and not just throwing paint at blank canvases.”

“Skyscrapers start from blank canvases, too. But fine, I understand what you mean. In the meantime, we can have the baby.” Zoe smiled and continued eating. She stirred her steaming pho noodle soup, scooping out a shrimp with chopsticks and blowing on it.

Jethro continued eating too. A minute later, slightly short on breath, he asked “Exactly how late are you?”

“Not too late.” She laughed, and then added, “Yet.”

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Gregory Michaelson was sitting on the carpeted floor of his suite at the Chelane Hotel in

downtown Washington, D.C. His hands were covering his head. His eyes were red and puffy. This was the worst week of his life, he thought, and then he moaned. His wife's threat of divorce came out of nowhere. In Upstate New York, a report had surfaced that over four million of its residents were going to bed hungry—an increase of 15 percent from when he was first elected. In New York City and its five boroughs, employment was plummeting while welfare claims were skyrocketing. Then there were renewed terrorist attacks across the country because of transhumanist concerns, and increasing pressure on him to do something about it. The media reported that Jethro Knights' group and his radical philosophies were still spreading, gaining a foothold in the American psyche, and converting other transhumanist organizations to take a hardline approach. Topping it off was Reverend Belinas, who carefully distanced himself by including his injurious mention in a *USA Daily Tribune* interview that new leadership might be needed at the very top of the NFSA.

Gregory wanted to sob. The shock was overwhelming. How could all this happen? Especially his wife leaving him. For what? That was the real bomb. It was the last thing he needed now that his life was so public. Besides, what about afterward? He would be practically broke without her. The way her dad always gave them property, and money was tied to the kids' trusts or to her own accounts, which the prenuptial agreement had strangled from the start. He could never touch the real wealth, just smell it. Goddamn it, he thought. And how the hell does she know about all those women?

He lay awake at night in the hotel suite, just nine blocks from their Washington, D.C. home; away from his children, his bed, his study, his wardrobe, his cigars, his giant high-definition television—his stuff. Amanda said she needed space to think it all over. Not an official separation. Just space. There was no choice but to acquiesce. Now he was on his seventh night in a dreary room, the curtains pulled to thwart pictures taken by journalists' telephoto lenses.

His meetings that week were a blur. Something about more Medicaid for New York. Cutting a ribbon at a new special education school upstate. An interview with a Christian magazine about the menace of the transhuman movement. An NFSA meeting with other members of Congress about handling the security flare-ups across the country.

Interrupting his melancholic thoughts came a welcome knock on his hotel room door. Amanda, he thought immediately. To make up? To forgive? He jumped up and rushed to the door. It was Reverend Belinas. At first, he was let down. But that quickly changed to a loose happiness. Or was it just a feel-good dependence? He didn't care right now—he just needed his good friend and mentor on his side. So far, he had confided in no one about what was happening, not even his aides.

“Reverend Belinas, how . . . how did you know I was here?”

“Come on Gregory, you wouldn’t expect me *not* to know what’s happening to you. Besides, your wife called me. She asked me to speak to you.”

“My wife?”

“Yes, your wife. Come on, sit down. Let’s have a talk. You look like hell.”

They walked across the length of the suite, and Gregory sat down on a small chair next to a coffee table. Belinas went to the sink and brought him a glass of cold water. Gregory took it and gulped it down like a child drinking warm milk.

“Your wife still thinks the world of you,” Belinas began, standing above him. “But for Christ’s sake, Gregory, apparently you’ve been failing in so many ways. Other women? Boozing it up at clubs with young nothings in short skirts? I’m incredibly disappointed in you.”

Oh God, Gregory thought. Everyone knows. The media too, probably. His worst fears. There was nothing to do but admit it all and ask forgiveness.

“I’m so sorry,” Gregory whined, feeling the surge of a confession coming on. “I don’t know what to say. There’s so much pressure on me from every direction. I’m not sure I can handle it, Belinas. My brain feels like it’s rupturing. My wife wants more and more. She wants me to tackle the presidency, *and* write a bestselling book, *and* be a good husband, *and* impress her father, *and* run for reelection, *and* walk the dog, *and* stop the transhumanists. I just want to go sailing, read the sports section, and

smoke a good cigar at night without my cell phone constantly ringing. A fifth of New Yorkers are hungry. Another ten million of them want their tax refunds back. Another five million want their unemployment checks. And there's just not enough money in the system to do everything. It's impossible. No one can get everything, but everyone lets you know it's your fault when they can't. Then there's you. You said it in the newspaper: you want to replace me at the NFSA, where I've worked so hard and spent so much time building it up. So many meetings and interviews and speeches and sleepless nights. Approving things, monitoring things, using methods that are...questionable, dangerous—maybe even criminal. And I know if I don't do it, you'll replace me."

Tears finally streamed from Gregory's eyes. "It's so hard to bear, Belinas. I don't think I'm strong enough for all this," he whimpered.

Belinas took a seat, letting Gregory break down. The reverend moved his chair to within three inches of the young man, in a gesture of support.

After two minutes of watching him sob, Belinas said softly, but with a firm tone, "Gregory, this is all your destiny. And we, your friends and your family, are counting on you to do these things for us and for the good of the people. For the nation. For the Lord. That's what a public servant does. That's what a man of God does. That's what a hero does. Whether you're afraid or not. Whether you're up to it or not, you are in the leading role here. My friend, you need to gather yourself. You need to stand up. You need to play the part. If I can't count on you, then I can't endorse you. If the people don't believe in you, then they'll recall you. If your wife doesn't see you being faithful and heeding her wishes, then she won't stand by your side. And who can blame her?"

Gregory struggled, but finally nodded his acceptance, sniffling grossly. He was caving inside. Belinas saw the putty easing further.

"And with your election coming up in less than two years, it'll be over for you. A divorced man twisted in scandal won't win. You know that. In fact, he'll disappear into obscurity. I can see it now: the lead man who was replaced at the NFSA. The cheating senator who couldn't keep his family together, let alone a national agency or the State of New York. He isn't going to be looked upon favorably. He'll be laughed at, pointed at, chided. You have no choice, Gregory. I want you to get a good night's sleep. Then get up in the morning, and go back to your wife and family. Apologize to Amanda, and say that everything will be made up for—all your foolishness, all your weakness. Now is your last and only chance. Impress her from now on, damn it."

"Will she take me back?" cried Gregory.

"She will. This time, she will. I've asked her to. There will not be a second chance, however. And as for me and the NFSA—you know what needs to be done. That's why the President appointed you. So do it better. Do it louder. Get the job done. The nation is counting on you, Gregory. Your wife is counting on you. God is counting on you. *I* am counting on you. Look beyond your small self and join the grander spiritual stage unfolding around you. It's a holy ultimatum, Gregory Michaelson. It's your choice."

The sobbing man looked at Reverend Belinas, solemnly nodding. Tears obscured his vision. As he clenched his fists, he promised himself he would not again fail those whom he cared about.

## Chapter 20

"Will you marry me, Jethro Knights?" asked Zoe Bach, continuing a conversation from weeks ago.

It was an honest question. They were at a frozen yogurt shop they often visited, their left hands interlocked across the table. Her belly was starting to show the child they had made.

Zoe worked when she could for Transhuman Citizen and still did surgery graveyard shifts. In downtown Palo Alto, they were known as the inseparable pair, always touching or holding on to one

another when they walked. No one was surprised when her stomach swelled, her hair lengthened, and a rosy glow began radiating from her cheeks.

Jethro continued laboring for the transhuman movement at a grueling pace, always seven days a week, often functioning with just a few hours of sleep a night. Much of his time was spent on airplanes, as he lectured in faraway places and searched out new, wealthier donors. He also befriended numerous transhumanist groups on different continents. Human enhancement and life extension leaders from many nations were increasingly warming to his philosophy, TEF. Despite its aggressiveness, it appealed to their honor and to the best in themselves. Amongst a world full of frivolities, hard choices in difficult times required a stronger integrity than ever before. TEF delivered and refused to compromise.

Jethro's new friendships also helped him form joint research projects to further common transhuman aims. He was now spending nearly half of his group's funding to directly sponsor immortality and transhuman research, often the most radical types which couldn't find money elsewhere. His pet projects were artificial intelligence morality, human cloning, and mind-machine interface. He gravitated towards supporting the work of scientists who others blackballed as too extreme and fringe, whose experiments usually occurred in small private laboratories or in the basements of nameless colleges.

To the layperson and the public, Transhuman Citizen was also gaining respect and recognition. Over time, it cemented its role as the leading radical transhumanist group in America: the one that sparked the most attention in the press; the one that youth and students joined most frequently; the one that organized the most demonstrations, strikes, and street trouble when religion or government challenged a transhuman project. Even the label, "Transhuman Citizen," had come to represent a trigger term in popular culture, providing a fighting euphemism for groups and people who faced oppression.

Ironically, just as Jethro Knights' organization was starting to make inroads into cracking ethical barriers and getting large swaths of society to consider transhumanist ideas, Transhuman Citizen's initial steep membership rise began to plateau—and then drop. Stiff headwinds created by the NFSA's new mandates and propaganda campaigns were starting to take hold. A month earlier the agency's pushy television commercials had begun rolling out across the country, openly discrediting transhumanism in favor of a crafty "back-to-good-old-fashioned-health" crusade. Additionally, the NFSA teamed up with the dreaded Internal Revenue Service to audit and comb over the books of private transhuman clinics and research labs across the country, hassling and penalizing scientists and employees for even the slightest accounting errors. Worst of all, the NFSA overhauled the patent-issuing process in biotechnology, making it difficult to control and own patents with controversial life extension and human enhancement possibilities. First, they bashed and choked the transhuman scientists, then they chained down the entrepreneurs who might invest in those scientists. Secure patent ownership and control was critical to entrepreneurs making capital investments in transhuman research.

"My love, you know that I'm not a fan of marriage," Jethro said, pushing aside his yogurt and staring carefully into Zoe's eyes after she asked him to marry her. "You know that I don't see what right the government or anyone else has to do with putting a stamp on a commitment as sacred as love. All the government is doing is layering more legal control over our lives and choices, and making the historical division of private property more tangible for themselves. Matrimony originally began, and continues to serve, as a function of economics. You and I just want to be happily and freely in love."

"Sure—call me old-fashioned and naive. But what about the numerous legal benefits when there's a child involved?" she asked, staring fixedly back at him. "Or if I were incapacitated in a hospital where a life-and-death decision by a legal spouse was needed?"

Jethro grimaced for an instant, not wanting to imagine anything harmful ever happening to Zoe.

"The same thing can be accomplished by power-of-attorney documents," he answered, "that say we're guardians of the child. Or a notarized legal consent proving I'm your domestic partner."

“How is that different than getting married though? Power of attorneys and notarized legal consents are valid because they’re sanctioned by the government.”

“Point taken.”

“We all choose to live in a civilized country we have agreed to be a part of, to follow rules and to not beat each other over the head with clubs. Being legally bound to me just facilitates and streamlines that process—a process you’ve already agreed to with your reasoning mind.”

“Point taken again,” said Jethro.

“So your reluctance—since I know you hope and want to spend your life with me—is purely symbolic. And whether you like it or not, your child or I might suffer hassles and setbacks in this world because of that symbolic non-action of yours. Is that really worthwhile? Is that really the most rational thing if we choose to live here in legalistic America, and raise our child here, and live according to laws we generally agree to?”

“How many points do you want tonight?”

“I want you to say: ‘Yes, I’ll marry you.’”

Slowly, he nodded. “Okay then. Yes, I’ll marry you.”

“Thanks.” She smiled, satisfied.

“Yes,” Jethro said brusquely. “Yes—as long as it’s not a big social wedding. Such contrived and overblown ceremonies, like funerals, are tacky. Far too many people live for their high-priced, ritualistic wedding days—or their blood-diamond engagement rings, for that matter—and not for the start of spending time with their spouses. It seems mostly a private matter.”

Zoe rolled her eyes. “Whatever, sweetheart—we’re obviously not them. So, is next week okay?”

“Sure. I think Tuesday is mostly open. But grab it quick before it fills.”

Jethro stared at her for a while, thinking. He watched her green eyes move in the shadows of her threadlike black hair. She stared back, eating her chocolate mousse frozen yogurt, waiting for him to speak. In the background, classical music played and other customers ordered their desserts.

“Zoe, you’re right on so many levels about why you want to get married. For me, part of the issue is that I don’t really believe I’m going to live here yet—in America, with its impoverished philosophical outlook. Or its legal and political buffoonery. But that’s purely technical. More importantly, I like the idea of waking up every morning and not being bound to another person, even you, unless I choose it. I think the choice to love someone should be made every day, maybe every hour. That’s what makes it special. That’s what makes it authentic. In general, anything that limits options—except the option to be stupid or wrong—is mistaken.”

“Fine, you’ve told me that caveat before. So let’s get divorced at night and remarried in the morning should you have issues.”

“No way—once will be enough. It probably costs money to get married. Green government bucks.”

“It does. Two hundred dollars for the license in San Francisco County. A divorce certificate costs over twice that,” Zoe said. “Maybe in that transhuman nation you want to create, you can make divorce a form of solidarity, a rite of passage for happily wed lovers with no intention of ever separating. And, of course, not charge anything.”

Jethro laughed and then replied, “Another fine and twisted, original Zoe Bach idea.”

“Oh damn, I have a shift on Tuesday,” she said, looking at the calendar on her phone. “How about Wednesday?”

“Nope. In Seattle for the robotics conference. Friday afternoon works.”

“Oh good. For me too. Then it’s a date: 3 P.M. at San Francisco City Hall.”

A week later, with Preston Langmore as their witness, Jethro Knights and Zoe Bach wed in City Hall, casually dressed and without rings.

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Every few weeks for the past eighteen months, Dr. Preston Langmore had requested a meeting with Senator Gregory Michaelson. He was always brushed off by Gregory's secretary, who first told him maybe; then yes; then no; or said the senator would be busy that week; or asked, How about next month? A dozen times that happened. Then one morning, surprisingly, Langmore received a call from Gregory's senior aide and was told the senator had free slots all week.

Langmore, who was working in Washington, D.C., replied that the next day would be excellent. Lunch at the Beldio Plaza. Chefistas. 12:30 P.M.

"The senator will be there. Thank you," said the aide.

Langmore's hopes jumped. Perhaps Senator Michaelson wanted to discuss lowering the anti-transhumanism pressure. Maybe he even wanted to work together with life extension and human enhancement scientists now. It could be an invaluable break in the overall goal of the movement, to not have to constantly fight and sneak around the colossal NFSA, which had created the most oppressive research environment in American history. If they could restore some federal funding to multidisciplinary sciences, which cross over from transhuman research to standard medical research, everyone would gain. Even a fraction of the budget of the NFSA could transform the transhuman movement and its industry. Why any nation would spend 500 times the money on its military over its science was not only asinine, it was also tyrannical.

The moment Senator Michaelson sat down at the restaurant, forty minutes late for his lunch appointment, Langmore knew nothing like that was going to happen. Gregory wasn't the same person he remembered—the good-looking young man who disarmed people with his charming smile and debonairness. He was now a darker, more bitter breed, motivated by forces far out of Langmore's reach.

"Dr. Langmore, I wanted to speak to you, in light of your being the informal go-to man of the transhuman movement in America. I'll just be blunt here because I have no time for lunch. The actions of the NFSA are in their infant stage. We are categorically not going to allow the transhuman movement to succeed. The ideas you people possess and the research in which you're engaged is out of control, totally mired in ugly, society-harming, science fiction fantasies. Your movement's morality is corrupt and evil in my opinion, and also in the opinions of many of the nation's top leaders. The already enormous budget of the NFSA is being doubled, effective immediately, ordered by the U.S. President. Like the War on Drugs, there will be an official 'War on Transhumanism' announced formally in the coming weeks. We are going all out on making the practice and science of transhumanism illegal. Harsher strategies inside the NFSA are being drummed up. New laws will be implemented in Congress. New mandates will be issued by the President. Everything is being finalized right now as we speak. We are going to destroy your scientists, their establishments, their lives, and their reputations. Leaders like you and Jethro Knights will be out of a job and made into outlaws very quickly."

Langmore appeared stunned. He looked around erratically as if he were being watched or filmed. This couldn't be happening, he thought. What the hell was going on?

"Are you kidding me, Senator?" Langmore finally blurted out.

"Do I look like I'm kidding, Dr. Langmore?" Gregory's eyes were icy.

"How can you say or do this? It sounds like the Inquisition. A war on transhumanism? By the U.S. Government? Isn't that taking it way too far? To make it criminal—in the land of the free? What's next, a deliberate transhumanicide?"

"I want to give you a clear message. I want you to let Mr. Knights and the other radical leaders in America know they are to abandon their organizations and disappear from the movement. And that your scientists are to work for the good of the country as a whole, to eliminate common diseases and

improve healthcare for the masses. From here on out, the mention of transhumanism, the changing of society through human enhancement and life extension, and the quest for immortality and God's powers via science, are going to be forbidden by federal law. I've woken up to your group's ambitions and see them for what they are: unbridled evil. If we left the world up to you and your colleagues, the best qualities of the human race would disappear, and the remaining parts would morph into something monstrous. The next century would be a calamity beyond our worst nightmares."

Langmore stared at the senator, speechless. This was beyond the U.S. Constitution—way beyond. Langmore was thinking about what Jethro had said two weeks before; that religious America could never give birth to a transhuman world. Their kind would have to leave and find somewhere brave and novel where transhumanism could genuinely prosper.

"In ten days, we'll formally announce the War on Transhumanism," continued Gregory. "I encourage you and your scientists to be very quiet from now on and to irrevocably change the direction of your research—or to be out of a job, on a criminal list, and possibly arrested. I'm here speaking to you because we do not want a fight. We want this transition to go smoothly and peacefully. We would prefer all of you to give up and rejoin us and the status quo. But we'll take to the streets and drag you all off to prison if you people won't change quietly and quickly. Our nation has put up with your immoral movement and ideas long enough."

Gregory rose from the table and began to walk away.

Langmore cried after him, "You can't do that, Senator. We haven't done anything wrong. It's totally unreasonable and utterly unconstitutional."

Gregory stopped and turned around slowly. "Watch me, Dr. Langmore. This is the final warning for all transhumanists."

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Two days later, over dinner in Palo Alto, Preston Langmore explained to Jethro Knights and Zoe Bach what Senator Michaelson had told him. The trio sat in Jethro's office on the tile floor, their half-eaten tapas dishes in front of them. Langmore's message was sobering. Zoe reached over and squeezed her husband's hand.

"He really means it," said Langmore. "I confirmed with my people that money is actually being diverted from U.S. Defense accounts into the NFSA. Huge amounts. Billions. Discussions at the top levels took place weeks ago. New directors and secret police are being hired by the hundreds, many of whom are registered members of Redeem Church and other powerful religious groups around the country. Senator Michaelson has met with the U.S. President three times in the past week, which is unprecedented for him, my sources say. Apparently, the potential social dangers of transhumanism—especially those from genetic engineering, neurotech, cryonics, and artificial intelligence—are getting ready to be trumpeted publicly as totally destructive to any future democratic society. It sounds crazy. What do you think?"

"I think Gregory Michaelson is an ass," said Zoe, storming. "He's filling the shoes of the other WASP politicians who founded this country and have led it for centuries. Those idiots are always the same—inexcusably late to the party. Abolition of slavery, civil rights, women's liberation, the LGBT movement, transhumanism. See a pattern yet with these guys?"

Jethro grinned at his wife, grateful to be in love with her. He stood up, stretched, and walked briskly to the coffee machine. He poured himself a cup, then turned around and said, "Gregory is just a tool. He's in Reverend Belinas' back pocket. And we're being used as scapegoats for religious conservatives to consolidate power."

"Probably all true," muttered Langmore.

Jethro walked back and sat down, crossing his legs. His brows appeared heavy, but his eyes were intent. He looked like a sea captain staring at a distant storm, carefully plotting a new course. Outside, a powerful gust of wind caused nearby trees to rustle, and many leaves dropped to the ground. Zoe watched him carefully and felt the energy in the room change.

“You two are the most important people in my life,” said Jethro. “So I want to tell you this first. It’s something I realized over a year ago, and have privately mentioned a few times to you both. I believe I’m now ready to declare it to all transhumanists after hearing that news.”

Zoe and Preston didn’t have to search Jethro’s face for answers. They already knew what he was going to say. They also knew it would change their lives forever. It was about *Transhumania*—his chosen name for an autonomous transhuman nation. Every time Jethro was dogged and stifled by America and the world’s short-sighted conservatism, he dreamt more vigorously of creating and founding such a utopia—a lasting panacea for transhumanists. It would be a mature evolution of the movement, he believed. A place far away from the reticent world, where radical scientific progress and the search for immortality could go unheeded.

“It’s no use here anymore,” Jethro said. “I’m utterly disillusioned with our progress in this klutzy, religion-addicted country. We’ve done well, for sure. We’re putting up a good fight. Transhuman Citizen has spread everywhere. We have members and supporters in every major town and city. But America is a bureaucratic mess full of twisted legalities, conservatism, and religiosity that does nothing but slow us down. Ultimately, it keeps us unproductive.

“The inefficiency across the land is so thick that, in all honesty, I doubt we can stay here and still pull off our dearest goals: immortality, scientific freedom, transhumanism. Even if the NFSA doesn’t get stronger, it would still be a steep, uphill battle. But now, with the rearing ugly head of a much larger beast, being better funded, and turning us into criminals using police-state scare tactics, it’s just going to get worse. A lot worse.

“The entire mission is just not working here fast enough. It’s in severe jeopardy. We need bigger funders on board, but they don’t want to come on until they see a place where their money can actually translate into scientific progress. Progress that gives them a better shot at living substantially longer—decades and centuries longer. We need a real place dedicated to just the transhuman mission, where that is all we work on and all we do. Where we can *really* be citizens of our mission. A bona fide nation for transhumanists: *Transhumania*.

“The scientists we currently support, the small research clinics we’ve founded, and the university centers we fund are just drops in the ocean of what needs to occur to reach our transhuman goals in our lifetimes. So much more needs to happen. And it must happen now, while we still have time. Before we get too old. Before the world mutilates itself more and slides into a second Dark Ages.”

“Are you leaving us then?” Zoe asked, her question loaded. “To go find this place? To go start *Transhumania*?”

“Yes, my love. I must,” Jethro answered, tenderly. “I’m going to officially announce that the leadership of Transhuman Citizen is leaving America and will restart somewhere new when it has found a proper home.”

“That’s a massive undertaking, Jethro,” Langmore said. “Think of all you’ve worked for here, all the progress. And what if they chase you?”

“They won’t chase us. They’ll consider it a victory if we leave. In a way, they’ll be right. We don’t belong here—not right now. We are marginal, scattered, fragmented. We are under their thumbs all across the country, always on the lookout, always berated, always rebuked. In so many unmistakable ways, we are living within their Judeo-Christian-inspired framework: under their laws; on their real estate; in their school systems; using their bank accounts; paying their taxes; getting news from their media; having them sanction our marriages, our deaths, our children’s births.

“Their management and regulation of our lives spans the total spectrum of American experience, from their obtuse Imperial Measurement System, to their irregularity-strangled English language. From

their lobbyist-ruled government bureaucracy, to their consumer-oriented religious holidays like Christmas. From their brainless professional sports jocks cast as heroes, to their anorexic supermodels warping the concept of beauty. These are the people who made sugary colas more important than water; fast food more important than health; television sitcoms more important than reading literature. They made smoking a joint in your home a crime; going out in public without your hair tinted an embarrassment; and accidentally carrying a half-filled bottle of baby formula on an airplane a terrorist act. Do you realize 85 percent of Americans still say ‘God bless you’ after someone sneezes? And that ‘In God We Trust’ is on every U.S. dollar in circulation? Or that ‘One nation under God’ is recited every day in the Pledge of Allegiance by millions of impressionable kids?

“From our first day alive on this planet, they began teaching society everything it knows and experiences. It was all brainwashing bullshit. Their trio of holy catechisms is: faith is more important than reason; inputs are more important than outcomes; hope is more important than reality. It was designed to choke your independent thinking and acting—to bring out the lowest common denominator in people—so that vast amounts of the general public would literally buy into the sponsorship and preservation of their hegemonic nation. Their greatest achievement was the creation of the two-party political system; it gave the illusion of choice, but never offered any change; it promised freedom, but only delivered more limits. In the end, you got stuck with two leading loser parties and not just one. It completed their trap of underhanded domination, and it worked masterfully. Look anywhere you go. America is a nation of submissive, dumbed-down, codependent, faith-minded zombies obsessed with celebrity gossip, buying unnecessary goods, and socializing without purpose on their electronic gadgets. The crazy thing is that people don’t even know it; they still think they’re free. Everywhere, people have been made into silent accomplices in the government’s twisted control game. In the end, there is no way out for anyone.

“What seems worst of all, though, is that even the leaders don’t recognize this. The greatest danger of the whole mess is that all this Western-American conditioning has been on autopilot for centuries. Nobody is in control of it anymore. It’s a mindless goliath wandering the Earth, devouring lives, erasing potential, and following its every whim—regardless of how irrational, obscene, uneducated, enslaving, or backwards its actions are. The American Dream has become a death sentence of drudgery, consumerism, and fatalism: a garage sale where the best of the human spirit is bartered away for comfort, obedience, and trinkets. It’s unequivocally absurd.

“Gratefully, Transhumanists think differently. We don’t belong to that feeble-minded populace. We don’t accept their rules and mandates as the gold standard of civilization and experience. We have seen their trap for what it is, and now have a very different mindset than the typical American. Yet, unfortunately, we’re still really just U.S. citizens, subject to their cultural, commercial, and religious colonialism—which includes virtually zero lack of rational futuristic vision or support for our transhuman causes.

“Ultimately, that’s why I feel Gregory is correct: we represent a huge disruption to their Judeo-Christian society. Their culture was designed to amass and preserve power to protect its conservative heritage, its nesting way of life, its consumer-addicted, Hollywood-inspired babies—all so they can remain wrapped up comfortably in their god’s hands. We want to amass and preserve power to protect our lives so that no god or group of irrational people could ever hold us in their hands. It’s so utterly different.”

Zoe interrupted Jethro by saying, “But no one will leave America to go somewhere else unless that place rivals America in terms of opportunity and possibilities. Including me.”

Jethro readjusted himself and knelt before her.

“Of course, my love. That’s why I must build this new transhuman nation. I must amaze you all. I must convince you that it’s the most remarkable and thrilling place in the world to be. I must make you want to go there. The jobs, research possibilities, and the atmosphere must be astounding—with fantastic pay, ultramodern facilities, and amazing collaboration between respected colleagues. I need to

make it so people yearn to be there. So they don't want to miss it. So they *refuse* to miss it. These are people you can't buy, but have to convince through a multitude of reasons, including their rationality, their professional ambitions, and most importantly, their transhuman dreams."

Langmore interjected, "Hopefully, *mostly* their transhuman dreams. It is, after all, their existences at stake if nothing becomes of the movement. What do you think, Jethro? How much more time do you think we need before we get close to a technical immortality for humans with our science?"

"Eight to twelve years, with enough funding. More years of experiments afterward to eliminate perils, unwanted side effects, and dead ends. In less than two decades, however, we could be at the doorstep of a reasonably waged, ongoing sentience. A place where transhumanists could easily make it into unlimited lifespans. So many of these breakthroughs are almost ours. I see and read about them all the time. Bobby Fitchenson in Maryland with his neurotech advancements. Jeannine Bernine in New Mexico with her super stem cells. Our own Phillip Maston with his genetic therapy miracles. But they could all be deeply stifled, or even lost, if this research is outlawed over the next few weeks or months. That's for sure. The NFSA must know that. Reverend Belinas and the top officials must know how close we're getting, and how momentous some of these advances are for the human species."

"But you've said it yourself before," Langmore said. "The full-blown Transhumania plan will cost many billions of dollars. To build those facilities, to buy an island or miles of land, to start construction on that scale, to start a real transhuman nation—that would take a thousand times more resources than we currently possess."

"Of course. It's farfetched now, Preston. We need so much more in funds. And the wealthy investors and donors who could realistically make it happen must believe in its success before they give to it. They voice it every time I speak to them. Yet, it's important to come to a conclusion here—that we're moving. That we're starting down that road. That we're implementing a radical new strategy. We are leaving to find and build Transhumania—the transhuman nation."

Jethro stood up, walked over to a large world map on his wall, and observed it.

"Preston, I need you to help me do this, to convince and lead your colleagues and the other groups to join me in creating this nation—this awe-inspiring vision of our future."

Jethro turned to Zoe, and painfully looked at her. "My beautiful wife, I need you most of all. To allow and encourage me to follow the path that you know I can't turn my back on."

## Chapter 21

Breaking news of the NFSA doubling in size to wipe out the transhumanist threat in America went viral. Media across the country rushed to capture and tell the story. The *USA Daily Tribune* was the first to officially print the new government slogan, "War on Transhumanism," delivered verbatim by Senator Michaelson in his latest interview.

IMN contributed their part by airing speculative TV news pieces about the increasingly frequent meetings between Reverend Belinas and the President of the United States: for lunch in Denver; at an awards ceremony in New York; opening a new government memorial together in Washington, D.C. The President even attended one of Belinas' sermons in Savannah, where the reverend preached that humans were made in the image of God, and that the unique image of the species was never to change unless God changed it. His sermon climaxed with, "God is not a machine, a cyborg, or a mutation. Humans should not be either—God and the Bible forbid it."

The *American Business Times*, the continent's largest business publication, ran an op-ed piece by Senator Shuman saying the time had come to defend the institution of being human. The article warned that U.S. scientists were already conducting experiments to create anomalies of humans, including a bionic subspecies. Shuman detailed in nightmarish terms the scenario of an American future where

some human beings were no different than fiendish monsters, taunting civil society and corrupting innocent, faith-minded youth.

Around the nation, a creepy apprehension began to form in the public eye, prompted by various government reports, the media, and even individual word-of-mouth accounts. Rumors were spread of human clones walking around unhindered in a major Los Angeles university's science department. A popular television news show accused an artificial intelligence program of haunting the nation's computers—declaring it responsible for causing car accidents in Miami, San Diego, and Dallas, when it overtook their respective traffic light grids. A bestselling author published a book detailing how a nefarious, self-replicating virus in navigation servers caused a recent commercial airplane crash in Chicago, in which 286 people died. A widely read government study explained how embryonic stem cell treatments derived from abortions were causing a soaring rise in autistic offspring. On the Internet, the most watched clip of the year was of a prototype Japanese-made cooking robot, caught attacking and wounding its owner with a knife.

Senator Michaelson went on numerous talk shows, loudly voicing that the dignity of our species was at stake. He claimed unprecedeted government force and diligence was necessary to implement the new, harsher strategies for eliminating the transhumanist threat.

“We’re shifting gears and ratcheting up the battle to stop what could very well be the greatest menace of our time,” IMN quoted him as saying.

Jethro Knights spent much of the past four weeks traveling in planes and taxis, talking to the leaders of the transhuman movement, revisiting donors, meeting with entrepreneurs, and trying to calm people's nerves. To each, he privately announced his plans to leave America and form Transhumania. Jethro was welcomed everywhere; however, far fewer people wanted to commit money or resources, especially to an audacious new idea like Transhumania.

“Unfortunately,” one entrepreneur reluctantly told him, “the new mandates of NFSA make it practically a crime to be associated with funding transhumanist groups. I have a family to feed and to worry about. I've been working with you guys for fifteen years, but I've got to call it quits before I get in real trouble.”

Adding to Jethro's frustration was a simple mathematical fact: There was less money to go around than the year before. The American and global economies had recently begun another decline. Stock market losses led to some business empires literally vanishing—and millions of jobs with them. The rich were bunkering up, permanently closing their wallets. The appetite for financial risk was nearing zero. Inflation shot up in the United States, as the government inevitably printed more money to fund its snowballing debt and its pet agencies like the NFSA.

Zoe Bach accompanied Jethro on his travels when she could, her belly showing at five months like a small basketball. Despite her initial reluctance, she eventually embraced his idea of Transhumania. It was just like him, she thought, to take on something so massive, so bold, so revolutionary. She knew that she would follow him. He promised her one of his first projects in Transhumania would be the construction of the planet's most extraordinary medical center for research and surgery.

Despite the crumbling world outside and the daunting battle with the NFSA, it remained an extraordinary time for Zoe and Jethro. They basked in the adoration of one another and spoke often of their child's future. Late at night, when Zoe was sleeping and gestating, Jethro would wrap his arms around her belly and feel the baby's soft kicks.

Zoe also provided Jethro a competent sounding board. He asked her opinion on all matters regarding the operations of Transhuman Citizen. She balanced his provocative persona and forcefulness with ideas of peace, compatibility, and diplomacy. When Jethro was away on business, Zoe painted life-sized walruses, lions, and elephants on a wall in the nursery, near where the crib would go in their new large three-bedroom apartment in Palo Alto. When he came home and saw the mural, he laughed, took the paint, and began drawing friendly-looking robots, computers, and rocket ships amongst the animals.

For Jethro, so much happiness and peace with Zoe bore strange, alien feelings. He wondered why as he jogged in the nearby foothills. He had never felt so content in his life, even though he knew so much difficult, perhaps impossible, work lay ahead. He conceded that this type of happiness was risky. His wife and imminent baby seemed unreal, a reverie too good to be lasting. A feeling of despair always accompanied moments of joy. His work, Transhuman Citizen's struggle, seemed more real, more tangible.

In the same week Congress approved additional legislation and funding to expand the scope and powers of the NFSA, Jethro Knights was invited to the annual Transhumanism Conference, to be held this year in Washington, D.C. With all the important leaders of transhumanism gathering there, it amounted to an epic brainstorming session on how best to ensure the movement's survival. It wasn't just in America that pressure against life extension and human enhancement science was growing; all around the globe, governments were clamping down on transhumanists and their organizations.

Due to all that had transpired in the past two years since the Cryotask bombing, Jethro Knights was asked to be the guest of honor and lead speaker of the conference. Preston Langmore insisted on this when he met with the meeting's organizers. He knew Jethro would use the opportunity to make his announcement of Transhumania, an idea Langmore increasingly embraced as a last-minute miracle pitch before the movement was forced underground or even disbanded.

Reverend Belinas thought the conference would be the best opportunity all year to ignite a loud transhuman catastrophe in public. Why not torch the entire banquet hall, he asked himself, imagining it to be like the Book of Revelation's lake of fire. No, too dramatic. Too difficult. Maybe just a small bomb, easily hidden, to kill Jethro Knights. A clear message and death blow to the movement. Without a true radical like him—one who would rather be skinned alive than give up transhumanism—they could never accomplish anything substantial.

A perfectly positioned bomb, Belinas decided. Then he telephoned his preeminent assassin, Katril Bentoven, and told him what he wanted.

Bentoven was a frail, dark-haired Mexican man who wore wire-rimmed spectacles and turtlenecks. Formerly employed by a dangerous drug lord in Mexico's prosperous narcotics trade, he was now a nationalized U.S. citizen living in one of Redeem Church's compounds in Florida.

"The security will be extremely tight in Washington, D.C.," Bentoven replied on the phone, immediately understanding the gravity of Belinas' request. "It may be impossible to get to Mr. Knights."

"Don't ever say the word 'impossible' to me again, Katril. You're better than that. Just make it happen, whatever it takes. I want him gone in a thunderous, public way. In front of his wife, his friends, his admirers—in front of the world."

"Of course, Reverend," Bentoven responded solemnly. "By God's will, it shall be done."

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Even with all the top transhumanist leaders present to strategize a survival plan against the NFSA, the Transhumanism Conference in Washington, D.C. was far smaller than expected. In the past month, many transhumanists in the movement had outright quit. Few were willing to be seen at an event where their names were sure to be added to a government blacklist. The pressure of the NFSA's witch hunt—forcing unemployment, creating public harassment, and even threatening jail time—was simply too much.

Jethro Knights remembered when he had passionately made his original Transhuman Citizen speech three years before to the same group of people. It felt like decades ago now. At age thirty-two, he was more ambitious than ever, but the powerful hand of the government, once dismissive and

skeptical, was now impossibly oppressive. He wondered if his new speech, titled *Creation of the Transhuman Nation*, would make a stronger difference this time. Therefore, he chose to distribute it in writing before the actual presentation.

The Transhumanism Conference was held at the Dawson Center, a mecca for large global conferences in America at a time when groups still spent money to put them on, which was becoming rarer in the recession. Transhuman Citizen took one of the largest booths at the gathering. It proudly promoted scientists it directly supported, and openly displayed their research and discoveries.

The Mobi Company ran the maintenance and janitorial service of the center. Their reputation was excellent, but a recent round of layoffs and wage decreases had damaged morale amongst its employees. When an agent of Belinas' Maryland Redeem Church team approached some of the Mobi crew for keys and inner access to the center, they agreed. Fifty thousand dollars was given as an incentive.

"No problem," responded two employees. "For that price, take our spare uniforms while you're at it."

Katril Bentoven stuck in two of his best men to replace the maintenance crew. He trained them in a warehouse in Detroit for a week. They became experts at imitating Mobi maintenance personnel. The night before the conference's final dinner, Bentoven's men hauled out the head banquet table for repairs. It was the table where Jethro Knights, Zoe Bach, Preston Langmore, and other honored guests were assigned to sit. The transhumanists always retained their own security too, but it was no match for keeping tabs on the hundreds of maintenance issues, catering details, and coordination challenges of running a 1200-person conference.

Besides, a terrorist attack in the middle of Washington, D.C. was thought unlikely to succeed or to be attempted. A fifth of the nation's active military was there. The police headquarters was located only two blocks from the Dawson Center. Entire streets in that district of the capital ran 24-hour surveillance cameras, per the NFSA's new mandate for better security.

Bentoven waited testily, standing against a dirty wall and watching the moonlit Potomac River through a broken window. His bomb specialist was next to him. They were in an abandoned warehouse in the industrial part of town. When the table arrived, Bentoven's men cut a thin round piece of wood from the bottom of it. A radio-controlled explosive device, the size of a Frisbee, was glued inside. Afterward, they shaved down the extracted piece of wood, placed it back into the table, and perfectly finished it with varnish. They quickly dried it with a hair dryer. Only an expert could see where the table had been altered.

Ninety minutes later, the table was back on a truck and being rushed through Dawson Center's gated security entrance. A man came out of a booth and looked it over, but waved it in.

"I think the last conference people damaged it," the security man said to his partner. "Looks fine to me. It's just a wooden table." The guards turned their attention back to their television. The college basketball game they were watching was now in overtime.

The table was carefully returned back to the front of the banquet hall. The Redeem Church men who carried it were nervous and heavily perspiring. They set it down gently and covered it with a white dining cloth, then put water glasses and silverware back on it before quickly leaving.

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"Is dealing with a tragic past easier when the future is infinite?" Jethro Knights asked himself in a dream. He stood atop a soaring skyscraper of light, surrounded by ocean on all sides. A moment later, he abruptly awoke in his hotel room in Washington, D.C. Outside, it was almost dawn. Through a window, the full moon was disappearing into the vast North American continent. Zoe Bach was next to

him in bed, her face pale but peaceful in the fading light.

He dressed quickly in his sweats and went jogging, still thinking of the strange question in his dream. He felt slightly nauseous. He didn't know that soon, still so early in his life, there would be an end that would remain with him—an end that would twist and forge everything he had ever wanted.

The Transhumanism Conference had so far proven uneventful, save the pall everyone felt. The consensus was simple: This time the government had gone too far and there was little they could do about it. Progress of the transhuman mission and the conquest of immortality were slipping away. Even if each of them were to defy the new NFSA mandates demanding they abandon transhumanism, little would change. They needed to regroup, in a statistically meaningful way, with many more resources. They needed to escape to a place where they would not be hindered. But how? Where? And, most importantly, with what money? Jethro Knights' *Creation of the Transhuman Nation* was a start. It spoke in detail of his intention to move Transhuman Citizen permanently abroad, to a new land, to a new place, to claim what was theirs—a nation of their own, where they wouldn't be mired in another country's politics, culture, or economics that impeded their goals.

Many at the conference griped and voiced that this was too extreme. Others said such a place was bound for failure because it would be impossible to legally and financially create. Some transhumanists agreed with Jethro's vision of an autonomous nation, but expressed that leaving would be too much for them and their families; many had sick parents and unemployed siblings who depended on them and were unable to travel; or they had financial investments that needed hands-on managing; or they were tied down with various other prohibitive, worldly chains. A few hardcore transhumanists said they would go, but only when they could be assured there was somewhere to go to, and not just an idea.

Jethro paid no attention to the plethora of doubts and reservations. At the conference, he remained a beacon of passion and hope, his machinelike personality convincing, debating, and pushing. He implored everyone to help each other, to band together, to stand up and find a new way to the future. He made believers out of skeptics, and in others he instilled ideas that might bear fruit later. But he was just one man, and much more was needed. Inevitably, by the third and last day of the conference, the transhuman movement did not appear as just a barely floating raft mired in a nasty storm, but a pile of junky flotsam, rapidly breaking apart and sinking. Leaving for any distant port now seemed impossible.

Despite this, Jethro's speech at the event's closing banquet uplifted everyone. He spoke of fighting for their destinies, their lives, and their indelible right to evolutionary advancement. He spoke of the undeniable promise of Transhumania and of their brilliant opportunity to push the Transhuman Revolution forward in the most remarkable of ways. Failure was not an option, he roared to the audience. And whatever the cost, to never give in to losing. They were at a crossroads—how they acted now would determine the rest of their lives and the course of history.

The people in the banquet hall stood up and clapped, not because they believed, but thankful the movement could still move forward through others who refused to quit, who refused to be afraid of terrorism, social ostracism, and prison time.

As Jethro returned to his seat, he waved to the standing crowd, and thanked them. He pulled out his chair and prepared to sit down. It was the cue for Katri Bentoven, dressed as a waiter, standing at the back of the hall by the kitchen door. He typed a code into his cell phone and pressed enter.

But Jethro did not sit down. Instead, Zoe Bach pulled him over to her and gave him a long kiss, embracing him tightly, pushing her bulging stomach into him. Her smile beamed.

An instant later, a fiery explosion ripped out of Jethro's table and across the room. Wooden splinters and metal shards sprayed throughout the banquet hall.

"Damn it," Bentoven cursed to himself, leaving the area quickly through the kitchen. He had misjudged and set off the bomb too soon. The brunt of the shards designated for the transhumanist leader went into Zoe's back, neck, head, and pregnant belly.

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The explosion hurled Zoe Bach and Jethro Knights fifteen feet across the banquet hall. Instinctively, Jethro grabbed for his wife in the air. Both were unconscious from the blast by the time they slammed into the ground.

When the smoke had cleared enough to see, a security guard ran up to Zoe and Jethro. He tried shaking them and calling their names. Inside of Jethro's brain, something deep and intrinsic fought to bring him back to consciousness. Twenty seconds later, he finally opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was blood. It was everywhere, drenching his face, his eyes, his hair, his hands—which were holding Zoe's head. He realized his fingers were touching something sharp and slippery. He didn't want to believe it, but he knew it was the edge of her cracked skull. He tried to lift her up, but found his arms were pierced with sharp metallic shards and mostly unresponsive. He managed to slightly push up her head, but Zoe wouldn't respond and showed no signs of breathing.

The security guard hovering over Jethro carefully lifted Zoe off him. He rolled her body over so that her face pointed upward. Behind them, people in the crowd were screaming and shouting. Everywhere in the hall was heavy smoke. Jethro pulled himself up, ordering his wounded arms to work. His legs were bleeding too, but at least they were still functional. He got onto his knees and bent over Zoe, watching her body bleed from dozens of places. His first sense was utter disbelief. Much of her clothing was shredded and gone. Long wooden splinters were embedded into her skin. A large hole was blown right through her back. Her stomach was ripped open, her uterus torn asunder. A tiny leg, slightly jerking back and forth, was hanging out with half its foot missing.

Within minutes, paramedics raced in and began to work on the wounded. Preston Langmore and two dozen others were also injured. Some people threw their jackets on the fires burning near the blast area. Water rained down from the ceiling sprinklers. Emergency exit doors were thrown open and crowds sprinted for safety, shoving each other roughly to escape. The scene was nightmarish chaos.

Coughing from the smoke, Jethro knelt above Zoe and yelled at her. He tried shaking her, tried waking her, but her eyes only fell towards the floor, lifeless. A paramedic pushed him aside and began searching Zoe for any vital signs. He found none. Another paramedic behind them raced to open an orange box containing a long, intimidating needle. It was epinephrine. Her chest shot forward with a huge breath once they punctured her with it. An oxygen mask was quickly placed on her face, and intravenous lines were put into her body. Her eyes fluttered, then closed, then reopened.

Jethro gasped, realizing his wife was still alive.

A stretcher board was rushed in and Zoe was placed on it. The paramedics lifted her up and began running, agilely carrying her around broken tables and chairs towards an ambulance waiting outside. Jethro hurried after her, limping, his arms heavily bleeding and burning with pain. He threw himself into the back of the emergency vehicle with Zoe and was treated with IV fluids for heavy blood loss.

Eventually, Jethro became dizzy and was forced to lie down, ordered by the paramedic at the back of the ambulance. Jethro felt faint. Too much blood had drained from his left arm, where a main artery was punctured. He lay down on a stretcher directly next to Zoe so that her head was only five inches from his face. He watched her. The paramedic looked at him, and cleaned the blood off her face for him. Jethro gazed into her left eye, the only undamaged one that could still see. She looked towards her stomach, but already knew. Jethro read the agony on her face. Moments later, she slowly fell into unconsciousness.

A vast, haunting sadness descended upon Jethro while he watched her.

Two minutes before they arrived at the hospital, Zoe Bach was administered another shot of epinephrine. She briefly regained consciousness. Jethro Knights followed her every movement, carefully squeezing her right hand. Her major wounds were plugged with gauze to slow the bleeding, and three intravenous lines ran into her. But her condition appeared far worse now—her skin was turning a light blue, turning cold.

“I...love...you,” she whispered, shivering, her vocal cords grungy and damaged. The look in her one eye conveyed a message of farewell.

Jethro spoke quickly. “We can fix you. You just have to hold on. We'll be at the hospital in two minutes.”

She moved her head slightly to say no.

“Zoe, we can fix all this.”

She attempted to smile—his forever optimism, she thought. She knew exactly what could be fixed and what couldn't. Half her right leg was almost ripped off. Her bowels were held in by bandages. Their baby had long ago bled to death. Part of her right eye and face were gone. Her scalp was cracked open, exposed to brain swelling and certain infection. Her left arm, discolored by bloody gauze, was missing the hand; it was still somewhere in the pile of rubble at the conference. There was no fixing this, she thought.

“Zoe, we can fix all this.”

“Jethro,” she said, her voice scratchy. Blood dripped from her mouth. “I don't want...to be fixed. That's your philosophy. Mine is life...and whatever path it takes. Including this.”

“No, Zoe, don't say that. Not now.”

“Yes...my love,” she said, her voice cracking. “I'm not going to make it...not going to journey with you anymore. I'm too damaged. Too damaged...to even be frozen. And right now...I don't want to be. I only want...to go where I'm going—where my fate is taking me. I feel no desire...to wake up to a broken body that's only half mine...half something else. Jethro, that's your personal mission. I've always supported you, always loved your ideas...your passion. But that is *your* destiny...not mine. Mine is here, at this moment, right now...with the man I love. Watching him...while I pass to somewhere else.”

Jethro wanted to scream, *No!* He wanted to shout his disagreement. He wanted to convince her to hold on longer. Life was passing from her, however, and he knew that the most love and dignity he could offer his wife was to respect her last wishes.

A spate of dreadful seconds passed—almost half a minute. Jethro and Zoe continued staring at each other. In the background, the ambulance's red emergency lights flashed and sirens sounded. The vehicle jolted to the left and right as it rushed through traffic. The brightly illuminated hospital was only a few blocks away now.

“I'll come find you,” Jethro whispered when he saw Zoe departing life, unable to control himself, speaking the language she understood.

“Yes...my love...I know you will...I'll be waiting.”

She knew his battle to let her go in peace, and squeezed his hand with what energy she possessed. She faded and was gone moments later.

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Jethro Knights was rushed to the emergency room at the Washington, D.C. City Hospital. Over a grueling five-hour surgery, all the metal shards and splinters in his body were removed, and his scores of wounds were stitched up. He passed out on the operating table and only regained consciousness in

his hospital bed forty hours after Zoe Bach's death. His head and body were wrapped in thick bloodstained bandages and gauze. At his bedside was Preston Langmore, sitting in a chair. The man looked aged, his hair deeply gray. His right foot and leg were bound in a long white cast; his crutches were resting against a nearby wall. He sat quietly, reading the latest publication of *Transhumanist Monthly*.

Langmore watched his friend slowly regain consciousness. Jethro looked, focused on him—and remembered. Langmore saw his pupils and thoughts withdraw inward, closing off to the world, a flood of pain consuming him.

Langmore pulled his chair closer. They sat in silence for five minutes before Jethro uttered, "She's gone."

"Yes, I'm afraid so. At least for a long time."

Jethro knew what he meant. But he didn't want to think metaphysically now. He didn't want to imagine what could happen if multiple realities could be fostered by new technologies in the future. What a strand of DNA from her blood samples at the hospital could do later. He just wanted his wife back. Now. As she was. And his unborn child. And the peace he knew. And the love.

"The body hasn't been put on ice. Some organs were preserved to be donated, but almost all were too damaged. After what happened, she wasn't a suitable candidate for the cryonics chamber. The paramedic told me what she said."

"Yeah," Jethro whispered, "She didn't want to try. I disagreed. But it wasn't my choice."

"Don't worry, Jethro. Forever is a very long time. The doctor says you're going to regain your full health with lots of rest. Get better and get back out there."

"Preston...I'm going to need some time. To get myself together. To decide how to proceed." Then he added softly, "To decide *if* to proceed."

The healing days were slow and exhausting. Jethro's body ached all over from the multiple wounds and the nearly 200 stitches holding together his skin. But his wounds did heal, and healed well. His youth and his body's robustness helped.

The loss of Zoe, however, did not heal. It worsened. It followed him long into the night and into his dreams. Jethro would imagine he was back in their Palo Alto apartment with scented candles burning and Mozart playing on the stereo, a vibrant happiness permeating the air. Zoe's green eyes shined brightly. Together they painted colorful animals and robots on the nursery walls.

Then the dream would slowly vanish as the scent of the stale hospital room filled his nostrils, and he became aware of the dim beeps of nearby medical monitors. Moments later, Jethro would jerk forward in the hospital bed, remembering exactly where he was—and the nightmare that was his.

For hours afterward he would stare at the walls, softly moaning, tears streaking from his eyes in the night's darkness. He desperately missed his wife—her touch, her voice, spooning her warm body through the night. The soft kicking of his child. He missed the many hopes and goals they shared together. Their loaded philosophical conversations. Her smile. The ease of her ideas. The Zenlike nature of her spirit. The wonder of her confidence about everything.

He reran some of Zoe's last words again and again in his head: *I don't want to be fixed.*

Did *he* want to be fixed? It wasn't that exactly. He just didn't want to die. He didn't believe in endlessly coasting through the universe as non-organized, unconscious specks of matter and energy, even if others called it "spirit." It wasn't that Zoe thought that exactly, either; she just wasn't worried about it. Her confidence and ability to peacefully accept the universe as it was astonished him. Especially since his every urge in the past had been to fight for survival and power.

She amazed him now more than ever. His stomach muscles tightened in agony; the pain from the loss of her was far worse than the pain from his physical wounds.

On his fourth day in the hospital, just before he signed the paperwork to cremate his wife, Jethro ordered extensive DNA, bone, and tissue samples taken from her body. He also arranged for her undamaged hippocampus—where long-term memories are stored—to be preserved in an experimental

new suspension liquid called Preservatia. He did the same with the umbilical cord and intact parts of the fetus, for stem cell potential. Lastly, he made careful digital records of her few donated organs' destinations. He planned to keep close watch over where they went, and who they went into.

When everything was complete, Jethro let her go. She told him once that cremation was her preferred end if she couldn't be cryonically frozen. In his wheelchair, deep inside the hospital's musty basement, he watched a mortician load her body into an incinerator. Sixty seconds later, she was no more.

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Jethro Knights remained insulated in the hospital from the hounding press. Day after day, the media smeared details of the terrorist attack at the Dawson Center across the news. Some journalists reported Jethro was dying—that transhumanism was losing its youngest, strongest leader and the last hope of the declining movement. Preston Langmore visited Jethro every day, telling him he was doing his best to manage the media circus.

“What’s there to manage?” Jethro replied testily. “It’s not working here anymore in this ‘nation under God.’ Religious superstition is the human race’s nemesis.”

“Of course, but at least you’re still alive. The movement can still continue. There still is some hope, somewhere. There has to be.”

Jethro wasn’t sure about that. He wasn’t interested in an organization that couldn’t win, that wouldn’t fulfill its destiny. Winning was everything when it came to Jethro’s immortality objective.

Over the next days, he spent his time in the hospital recovering and reading. Langmore brought him the books he requested. Stories of heroic explorers, of spirited generals, of resilient scientists, of immovable philosophers, of intrepid founding fathers of nations. They blew inspiration into the depths of his mind. Jethro desperately needed it. He felt so dark inside, so outraged. He utterly wanted revenge against those who killed his wife. So far, the authorities investigating the bomb blast had found no concrete leads, not even any persons or groups of interest. Obviously, Redeem Church and other extreme religious organizations in America were behind it, Jethro thought. With the NFSA carefully watching over the Dawson Center bombing investigation, however, Jethro knew the police would never delve too far into the case. Soon, it would be relegated to just another unsolved murder.

From his hospital bed, there was little he could do. Furthermore, there was nothing that could change what had happened. He tried not to think about it. He observed his thoughts, noting in his journal that he couldn’t go thirty seconds without thinking of Zoe. When he forced himself to do it, the forcing seemed more like thinking of her than not. The sorrow was penetrating and pervasive.

After five days, and at least a few days earlier than recommended by his doctor, Jethro got out of bed on his own power and walked to the bathroom. Some of his wounds began bleeding through their stitches. He relished the pain. It helped him to focus on something other than Zoe.

Eight hours later, during the exchange of nurses, he put on some street clothes, limped out of his room, and began walking towards the main entrance of the hospital. The press was there, waiting—presumably for him. He quickly turned away unseen, and hobbled out the back entrance, making his way through an underground parking lot. From there he walked up to a public street and grabbed a taxi, taking it to a small motel on the other side of town.

The next day, wearing sunglasses, a baseball cap, and a long scarf covering his wounds, he walked slowly to a bookstore with an empty backpack. He filled it, then went to an international airport and bought a one-way ticket to the Bahamas. Three hours later, he was airborne.

Shell-shocked and despondent, Jethro wasn’t sure what he should do now with his life, but he knew it was imperative to figure it out. Thinking on a warm, isolated beach seemed like a prudent place to

begin.

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The question that kept returning to Jethro Knights' mind deeply troubled him: Why should he continue at all? It was not a question he could remember ever asking himself. He sat on a pink beach on the island of Eleuthera, staring at the sea. Wounds were all over his body, and the sand stuck to his stitches. What he undeniably knew was the loss and death of Zoe Bach had decidedly dulled his drive for life. Perhaps it was the lack of sorrow and pain in his life that made him originally want to live so much, he thought. Perhaps that's what made him unafraid to transcend any boundary of the human species to reach the highest in himself. Slavery to emotions so dire was not why he planned or wanted to live forever. Was life worth living for thousands of years without her? Without his family? Without the love he came to know, trust, and believe in?

His thoughts jarred him. They filtered through his existence, through his pantheon of memories. Was this just mourning? Or who he really was now? He looked in the mirror one night after downing a bottle of wine, feeling that he was changed, feeling that he was almost afraid of life without her. The firmness and confidence that once filled Jethro's heart were gone. He questioned if he could ever be the same, if it could ever be worth it again. The power and certainty that had always made him different from others had vanished. The force he had relentlessly clashed against over the years: The unnamed, unformed defeatist ghost strangling the human spirit's best potential—the same irrational beast he couldn't describe while walking away from Professor Rindall's class at Victoria University—was now taking explicit shape. And it dangerously tried to seize hold of him.

Jethro awoke in an old, wooden, plantation-style hotel. From outside his small room the sound of ocean waves trickled in. It was exactly two weeks since Zoe had died. His first conscious thought that morning was of her. Again. He wished he could turn over and feel her body. But she was gone. Every day, little by little, he forced himself to understand that. To accept it. His brain wanted to think differently, to dream, to barter. Nothing, however, was so final as death.

He looked in the mirror, watched himself repeat the words: "Dead. She's dead. Zoe is dead. Your wife is dead."

During the past few mornings, Jethro had taken long swims in the ocean for exercise, but today at dawn he put on his running shorts and walked out onto the sandy beach. His body could now take the jarring, and so he began to jog—slowly at first, then faster. He ran until his knees felt like buckling, until blood trickled from his stitches. When he was overwhelmed with pain, he began the long walk back to his hotel. Jethro returned right before noon, sweaty and limping to his room. Blood dripped down his arms and legs.

Inside the transhumanist, pain swelled. He used it like a drug. The same with his books. He reread the most important ones from his sailing trip: the novels or nonfiction books that motivated him; that moved him; that had helped form much of his perspective on life. He launched into stories of philosophical depth, of challenge, of acceptance. He sat on the beach, watched the waves surge against the shore, watched them wash away the sand. Likewise, he tried to wash away his agony. He succeeded for an hour, then returned to his room and collapsed on his bed, lost and crying about Zoe.

Another week went by. The swimming and running brought his body into shape and toned his muscles. He checked his email once. There were 1226 new messages. His cell phone's voice message inbox was full. Instead of answering, he texted his secretary and copied Preston Langmore on it:

*Safe. Healing. Need another week. Please absorb emails and calls.*

*Thanks kindly,  
Jethro*

He wasn't sure if it was the right thing to say, how long it would last, when he would be back, what he would do, why he should go back.

Jethro considered the heart the all-encompassing instrument of passion and determination. There was such obsession there, such danger, such potential grief. He didn't regret loving Zoe. He saw it as a calculation he had once walked away from in Kashmir, but knew better than to do so ever again. He lacked the understanding to see how he could feel so lost now, so directionless. He could no longer see a map of his life in front of him.

On the nineteenth day after the bombing, he awoke to splattering rain on the rusty tin roof of his hotel. He was surprised. He had slept five hours straight—almost through the whole night. It was the first solid sleep he could remember getting since Zoe was still alive. He walked to the window and immediately knew that day was going to be different. Something inside him was mounting.

Outside on the beach, he stood and watched the waves. On the previous day, the swell had begun to grow large and powerful. By this day, the waves were giants—nearly three stories high. A late seasonal hurricane was passing only a few hundred miles offshore. Coconut trees were arching from heavy winds. Jethro wanted to bodysurf, but he wasn't sure if it were possible. It was dangerous, potentially suicidal. It reminded him of Zoe's fall in the Himalayas.

Recklessly and impetuously, he jumped up and walked into the ocean. After ten minutes of fighting the white, foamy, tumultuous soup, and swimming furiously to get beyond the surf's impact zone, he finally made it out to deep blue water. For a few minutes the ocean went suspiciously quiet. He turned on his back and floated. He let the rain pelt his face. Deep inside he had an ominous feeling—the same kind he felt the morning before Zoe was murdered.

On the horizon an immense wave materialized, sweeping towards him. It was far larger than the others he had watched from the beach and not dissimilar to the rogue wave that had once threatened his boat, *Contender*. He turned to it and thought, this is the one to bodysurf. Let me be damned. Let the ocean consume me. Let the reef, fishes, and sharks tear my dead flesh to shreds.

When the heaving wave arrived and began to hit the reef, he swam into it using all his strength. A moment later the surging wall of water caught him, and he slid down the top of the crest, bodysurfing with one arm in front of him. He kicked hard and tried to turn down its face to angle into the barrel. But the breaker sucked inward; its thick lip shot out and sent Jethro skimming twenty-five feet to the bottom, partly in the air, partly on the water's surface. His body was like a flat, skipping rock. Soon the tube—big enough to fit a small house inside—enveloped him.

There was no riding this wave out; bodysurfing always involved wipeouts. Jethro felt the barrel begin to close, the wave begin to roll forward, the power begin to squeeze every inch of air out of itself. It launched him weightless for an instant, as water surged against the reef. He felt the energy all around him, felt his body tighten up, preparing to be pummeled by the ocean and into the razor-sharp volcanic rocks underneath him. An instant later, the force of thousands of tons of water catapulted him into a wall of erupting whitewash.

Twirling upside down, Jethro Knights cringed at the ruthless pressure on his wounds, on the twisting anatomical structure of his bones. He tried fighting his way to the surface, but the force of the wave pulled him deeper, exploding repeatedly upon itself. Finally, like a canon going off, it jettisoned him directly into the reef. His left torso ripped on a coral head, tearing off his flesh. Next, he slammed his shoulder upon a boulder the size of a refrigerator. Then he was dragged upon the reef, his knees banging against toothed rocks. His face grimaced upon the impacts, a noise emanating from the pressure in his air pipes each time he was battered.

The unrelenting wave dragged and tossed him, slashing him apart against the coral. Eventually, it pulled him over a hundred feet across the bottom, finally trapping him, cramming him into a tight

crevice, claiming him its prisoner. Jethro direly needed oxygen in his lungs. But there was no way to the surface. Instead, the swarming water pressure around him began forcing seawater into his esophagus. His brain flashed panic, his mind screamed. His subconscious freakishly began repeating the clicking noise of a landmine. It echoed in his ears. The wave and the ocean were not going to release him. Dizziness engulfed him. His equilibrium failed. His mind told him the end was coming. The end of everything.

At that exact moment, from the most elemental part of his existence, from the deepest reaches of his being, from the very fabric of his DNA, something reignited in Jethro Knights. Something profound, intrinsic, and ancient. Like a flame that shoots and expands across the thick surface of gasoline, exploding into every molecule around it. This flame challenged the greatest danger of his life—and soundly defeated it. The pain and confusion in him caused by Zoe's death was smothered by it. The hurt and sadness were muted by it. They each began receding, dissipating. A far-reaching primal force found its way back into his psyche, back into his spirit, back into every cell of his body. Jethro desperately yearned for life, for power, for air into his lungs, for his mind to control and triumph over his physical surroundings—for the universe that only his own will forged.

The feeling to die of non-effort, to tap the void, to embrace pain, of confusion and loss, and of directionless paths, was now dead in him. After almost two minutes underwater, he discovered the strength to overcome the pressure of the waves, to free his body from the vicelike grip of the tiny cave in which he was stuck. Reaching his hands outside the crevice and grabbing onto the jagged reef, he flexed every muscle of his fingers to secure a sure grip—then slowly, painstakingly, ripped his entire body out. Blood, from the tearing of his skin on rocks, colored the water. When his legs were finally free, he used them to push himself off the reef, and swam towards the light. The tumbling of the ocean's breakers joined him, aiding his burst to the surface. His first breath was an announcement to the Earth, to the universe, that he was back; that he was going home to embrace his evolution, to wage his war, to fight for something that was as innate as life itself.

On the shore, he felt his wounds reopen. He licked his blood, felt his sweat mix with the rain and salt. He thought it should remind him of Zoe, but it didn't. It reminded him of something else, of something more important. Far more important. It reminded him of himself. Of his own mortality. Of his own life and death.

He thought, I'm healing. I'm being restored.

Eight hours later, he boarded a plane for Silicon Valley, ready to engage in his transhuman quest again. He wasn't sure how he was going to win his battle against mortality and the anti-transhumanists, but that wasn't important just then. The only thing that mattered, he promised himself, was that he wasn't going to give in—not for one more goddamn second.

## Chapter 23

Back in Palo Alto at Transhuman Citizen's headquarters, Jethro Knights pushed himself with renewed vigor, working twenty-hour days. He rarely slept in his apartment anymore, only in the office. He kept a sleeping bag under his desk. It was just easier, especially because the sheets and pillows at home still smelled like Zoe Bach. Sometimes his secretary would find him at 8:00 in the morning, bundled on his couch. She would brew him coffee. He would rise and immediately start working again, saying only, "Thank you, Janice."

A third of Jethro's fifty-person staff had quit immediately after the conference bombing. The NFSA contacted his remaining employees a week later, warning them that criminal charges might ensue if they continued working at Transhuman Citizen or for any other transhumanist group. This forced many workers to reconsider their loyalty to transhumanism. Even if some employees chose to

stay, each worried about whether Transhuman Citizen would survive another six months—and if it did, whether they would still have a job with it. Jethro promised each of them they would, emphasizing that their organization still had plenty of money for operations and workers' salaries. He also assured them the NFSA would need to go through a lengthy legal procedure to arrest anyone or shut down their group.

Despite his assurances, every day more of his team chose to quit. Jethro individually pulled many of them aside, asking them to bear with him a little longer until the plan to move abroad was finalized and launched. But over the next month, threats of jail time, pressing home mortgages, health insurance bills, and safer job opportunities ultimately took most of his employees away. Some NFSA officials stooped so low they called his employees in the middle of the night and threatened them. The editor of the *Transhumanist Monthly* quit after he found a picture of his family taped to a hand grenade in his mailbox.

The government made hostile efforts to bring down the operational side of Transhuman Citizen too. They publicly canceled federal contracts and grants with scientists and their universities who were in any way linked with Jethro's group. Those transhuman associates and their establishments then canceled their own agreements with Transhuman Citizen, saying that work and research were impossible to accomplish. Jethro asked those clients and colleagues not to quit just yet, explaining that an exciting new plan for transhumanism was being developed. Many wouldn't listen. The pressure was too intense. People complained loudly, telling him outright they didn't want to end up like him—with their loved ones murdered.

Jethro pushed on, attempting to hold the organization together. He tried to keep research moving forward while devising a strategy for going abroad and founding Transhumania. Less than a handful of hardened employees stayed on, helping him, wanting to believe—most having nowhere else to go and nothing to lose. Despite his group's continued operations, it was obvious to everyone that Jethro's transhuman mission and its revolution were gasping for its last breaths. Even the dozens of daily protesters outside his office realized this. One mid-morning they arrived at Jethro's headquarters, and only four employees were working inside the large three-story building. The protesters' leader, an obese evangelical Christian man, announced that Transhuman Citizen was no longer worth protesting against.

"We're wasting our time here. They're too small and insignificant to bother with anymore," he said. "Their offices are all empty and gathering cobwebs. They'll be lucky to survive another week. Let's all head downtown to the abortion clinic and see if we can save some souls there."

If the days were desperate, Jethro didn't seem to notice. He chose only to work harder, putting in longer hours, and cultivating every bit of his vision for Transhumania. Once his concept of the Transhuman Nation had substantial research and a detailed business plan behind it, Jethro turned his attention to the most critical part: getting investors and wealthy donors on board. His chief problem was that the truly affluent people in the world—those with a billion dollars or more—were old, mulish, and pompous. Most were religious and believed their faiths already guaranteed them immortality, so they felt untouchable. They saw themselves as grand philanthropists, magnanimously giving their money to religious missions, wildlife organizations, low-income-children clinics, rotary clubs, Third World hospitals, homeless persons foundations, and similar politically correct entities.

Many of those billionaires had already refused to give Jethro or other transhuman leaders money for their groups. Still, he had no choice but to attempt courting them further, hoping he might eventually generate a more favorable outcome. Jethro knew it would only take one fully committed super-rich donor to build Transhumania—and change the course of human destiny.

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Jethro Knights didn't know it, but nearly a decade before, Russian oil baron, Frederick Vilimich, watched him give the U.S. President a hazing at the Transhumanism Town Hall Forum. Six years later, the billionaire watched the Cryotask building explode live on television. Recently, Vilimich saw news coverage of the bomb blast at the Washington, D.C. Transhumanism Conference—and remembered the name Dr. Zoe Bach. Vilimich researched what had occurred in between the three points. He was not a person easily moved out of emotion, nor one to help any other human being out of pity or guilt. His reputation of being a hard-nosed bastard, despite being the third richest person on the planet, grew more legendary every year. Nevertheless, love—real love—he understood. And the look on Jethro's face, as he followed his dying wife into the ambulance, he understood.

Vilimich understood it as only a man who had once lost something so precious can. His own wife and child were murdered in a terrorist attack twenty-six years before, when he had no money. When he had no power. When he had no one to turn to and ask for help. He was just a soldier in a seemingly endless Soviet-Afghan war. Vilimich never recovered. He promised to never father a child again, to never love again, to never get close to anyone.

This billionaire was not like the other uber-rich people on the planet. He felt no sanctity for a world that had chronically fought him; that took away those whom he cherished. He felt alone in the universe. He relished his spiteful habit of shouting obscenities at anyone who dared to ask him for charity. Vilimich was nicknamed “The Lucifer of Energy” by his own people for his hardball tactics of amassing his fortune at the disregard of the environment and the tens of thousands of workers he employed.

As Jethro went to sleep at 4:22 A.M. on his office couch, another nineteen-hour workday behind him, he didn't know this man was thinking about him. He didn't know this man was in his private jet flying to see him—a man who would one day compel Jethro to make the ultimate sacrifice.

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Frederick Vilimich began amassing his twenty-billion-dollar oil fortune during the collapse of the Soviet Union. Three years before that, in 1986, he was appointed director of operations for a tiny government-owned oil entity in southern Russia. At the start of the collapse, he approached a Soviet army general with ties to the top of the political system. He offered to partner with the man and make a run on a huge swath of bankrupt government oil companies in northern and southern Russia, snatching power illegally during the union's breakup havoc. It worked, and soon Vilimich and the general presided over nearly a sixth of Russia's oil reserves.

Over the next decade, increased global demand sent oil prices skyrocketing. Against the opinion of many people—including the general—Vilimich used every ruble of the company's booming earnings to acquire the most technologically advanced oil extraction equipment available. Within a few years, the company quadrupled its oil output and became a dominant player in the worldwide energy field. Then the general mysteriously died, and little proof of any ownership of the company except to Vilimich remained. Fingers were pointed, courts deliberated, the KGB snooped around—but nothing was ever proven. In the tumultuous birth of the new Russian nation, everything was quickly forgotten.

Even at the advanced age of fifty-three, Vilimich remained physically intimidating. His tall, bulky body appeared similar to that of a world-class rugby player. His disheveled black hair and pasty alabaster skin added to his harrowing mystique. His voice was permanently hoarse, the result of yelling at nearly everyone with whom he had come into contact for twenty years. He liked to think of himself as an order-issuing machine.

After the death of his wife, he never married again. A harem of international lovers longed to wed him, but he wouldn't allow it. His public hatred of organized religion made him despised by the

Russian Orthodox Church, the Vatican, Muslim sects, Redeem Church, and countless other religious entities. He was loathed by his own people for never giving one ruble to charity. He treated his workers poorly compared with other large oil companies, but paid them better. Governments feared him for his habit of impetuously shutting down his oil pipeline for days at a time, thus creating worldwide spikes in energy prices. Some said he did it just to amuse himself; others insisted he just wanted higher oil prices; still others grumbled that he just wanted to remind people who was in control.

Last week, Vilimich read that Jethro Knights' organization, one of the last visible transhumanist groups in America, was nearly bankrupt—the result of a U.S. Government clampdown on its bank accounts. Similar strategies against transhumanist organizations recently occurred in Russia, China, and Germany at the request of American politicians. The world was afraid of evolution, Vilimich told himself, shaking his head in frustration. His grueling but successful battle against colon cancer reminded him that life was not open-ended. He thought of his wife and son.

Even though Vilimich had always appreciated transhumanism, he never felt the need to do something for the movement. He was not a person who desired to live forever or to transcend himself. He was only a man who wanted something back: his wife and child. Over the past two decades, he had attempted to get them back in a myriad of ways. Some attempts were wild and esoteric, like hiring spell-casting soothsayers, or channeling through mediums, or praying with drug-induced shamans. Other times, he engaged in elaborate rites with occult priests, or meditated and fasted for days in Tibetan temples. He tried everything to find and contact his dead wife and child, in the far-fetched hope there might be a secret conduit into an afterlife. Nothing worked. As he suspected beforehand, all those guises were trickery and false illusion.

His life changed when he picked up a popular technology magazine and read Jethro Knights' 4,000-word essay, *On the Transhuman Possibility of 11th Dimensional Superstring Theory Realities*. Jethro's message was totally different and far more promising. It described, in scientific terms, that if people lived long enough, with all the achievable technological advancements in a thousand years, teleportation into multiple dimensions via antimatter would be possible—and with it, the ability to reverse time and bring back anything anyone desired. Human reanimation, Vilimich whispered to himself. He relished the thought while fingering the faded photo of his wife and son, which he always kept in his shirt pocket. Jethro's essay cited in elaborate detail exciting research on Xenon force fields, dual universe collapses, and antimatter circles theorems, all within the proven string theory universe concept. Transhuman Citizen was one of the major financial backers of the research. This was real science, already engaged in trying to make those things happen.

Why not? Vilimich asked, enthralled. Just give it a century of development. Then we'll see some real progress, he thought.

A plan in the Russian's huge head began brewing. It deeply excited him. He became obsessed with it. Vilimich was a believer in change via technology. It had always been a natural instinct for him. He laughed at himself for ever thinking that mediums, soothsayers, or priests could help him get what he wanted. They couldn't; however, advanced scientific technology, hard work, and wits most certainly could. They were the exact same things he had used to create his sprawling oil empire.

After the article, he spent a week reading everything Jethro Knights had ever penned. He studied the transhuman movement in detail, hired a Ph.D. researcher to verify the science, and watched countless videos on Transhuman Citizen's website. Vilimich liked what he saw, but he still wasn't ready to meet Jethro. Then the conference explosion occurred in Washington, D.C. He watched it unfold on television while flying in his jet to a business meeting in London. He watched the news footage of Jethro following his unconscious wife into the ambulance. He watched the transhumanist's face. *That face!* he thought, remembering his own bloody son in his arms.

That's when Vilimich knew it was time to go see Jethro. He gave the young man a month to mourn, then departed for California to find him.

Jethro Knights wasn't in Palo Alto when Vilimich arrived unannounced at Transhuman Citizen's

headquarters. He was pursuing a San Aliza Medical College professor in San Francisco who had recently found his bionic vision grant suspended by the government. Two days after the suspension, the scientist coldly informed Jethro he wasn't interested in collaborating with his organization anymore, despite an extensive contract he had signed earlier in the year with Transhuman Citizen.

In the middle of his meeting with the scientist, Janice Mantikas called Jethro. She let the ringer sound twice, then hung up and called right back. The code meant it was an urgent call. Jethro stared at his phone, frustrated. He apologized to the annoyed scientist, explaining it was an emergency call from his secretary. Jethro promised he would be right back. He walked into the hallway and answered his phone.

"I'm so sorry to bother you," said Janice. "But there's someone here to see you."

"Well, does he have an appointment?" Jethro asked impatiently, trying to control himself. "I'm in San Francisco in an important meeting. You know that."

Janice looked at the huge Russian man in a black trench coat in front of her and she whispered, "I don't think he's the kind of person who makes appointments."

Jethro understood the tone of her voice. He was quiet and pensive for a moment, then asked, "Who is it?"

"It's Mr. Frederick Vilimich, owner of Calico Oil," she said. "I believe it's about the possible new funding he mentioned."

Jethro went silent on the line for four seconds before his right foot shot forward and he started to run, shouting, "Janice, make him some coffee, give him the conference room, hand out some reading material—do a Russian jig on the tables if you need to. I'm already driving. Thirty minutes max. Don't let him leave under any circumstances. Chain him to the table, but don't let him leave."

Jethro was hopping down the fire exit stairs in the research hospital at full speed, clearing three steps at a time. In less than two minutes, he was driving his jeep and running red lights until he hit Interstate 280. On the freeway, he slammed down his accelerator as far as it would go, and soon his wobbly vehicle was topping 110 miles per hour.

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From the conference room window, Frederick Vilimich saw Jethro Knights' jeep skid into the handicapped parking spot, the space nearest the office's main door. The Russian smirked.

Jethro ran into the building, passing his secretary and security guard without a word. At the shut conference room door he stopped abruptly, took a deep breath, focused, then slowly turned the handle and walked inside.

Jethro and Vilimich's first look at each other was mutually jolting—a meeting of two powerful headlights illuminating one another. Neither man was sure why.

Jethro walked over to the billionaire and extended his hand. "Mr. Vilimich, thank you so much for visiting today. I'm glad you chose to come here."

Vilimich usually disliked people straightaway, but Jethro reminded him of something . . . precious. He wanted to think: what his son might've been like had he reached Jethro's age; however, his mind would not allow a thought like that. Over many years he had mastered the practice of covering up his wound.

"I'm glad I chose to come here too, Mr. Knights," Vilimich said, his accent heavy, his handshake like a vice-grip.

"Please, call me Jethro."

"Okay, Jethro," he said, grinning broadly, a hint of mockery on his lips. The man began slowly walking away, around the twenty-foot-long conference room table, his facial expression carefully

changing to cold seriousness with each step. When he stopped and turned to Jethro, a trace of gloom emanated from his thick brown eyebrows. “I understand you are a man of special talents. One who has the courage to stand up to the world and speak boldly.”

“I try to do that, Mr. Vilimich. I believe standing and speaking up is better than sitting and listening, especially when it comes to transhumanism.”

“Well said. Though sometimes, standing and speaking can get you in trouble. Big trouble.”

“Yes, that is true, Mr. Vilimich. And it’s probably quite obvious to you that I’m in big trouble right now.”

“Yes, I can see that. Your headquarters is empty of employees. The government is calling you a criminal. The transhuman movement is on the verge of failure.” Vilimich paused, looking straight into Jethro’s eyes. “And your wife and unborn child are dead.”

Tension ignited the air. It was not something that civil people said unchecked to one another. Jethro stared stiffly at the man. The Russian knew he had set off a bomb. He waited for it to explode.

In spite of it, Jethro would not be stirred—too much. Instead, he nodded, forcing himself to smile—the saddest smile Vilimich ever saw—and let a difficult moment pass. “That is true. There’s been lots of trouble lately. But it’s nothing I can’t handle.”

The Russian was impressed. Of the control, of the ability to contain the hurt. He knew that he wouldn’t have been able to do that at Jethro’s age. Or even now. He would’ve crushed someone’s skull.

Vilimich lifted his head, grunted loudly, and deferentially said, “I met Dr. Bach once in Indian Kashmir. She correctly diagnosed me with colon cancer.”

“Yes, I remember that. She told me the story. She was a talented doctor. The tent you gave to the village of Kundara is still there today serving its purpose.”

Vilimich’s lips puckered at the word “purpose.” The Russian crudely cleared his throat.

“Mr. Knights, I came here today with an incredible proposition for you. I have things to give you to help your big troubles—such as half my wealth.”

Jethro listened carefully, understanding that this man was testing him.

“That’s a lot of wealth, Mr. Vilimich.”

“In this day and age, it’s enough to buy or start a new country, if you know what I mean. Which I’m quite certain you do.”

“Yes, sir. I do.”

“Yet, I would only share such a thing if I were to get something very specific in return. And I must tell you, I’m not a transhumanist. At least, not like you and your colleagues.”

Jethro appeared surprised.

“If you’re not a transhumanist, then what are you?”

“I’m a man who wants something back. Something very precious to me.”

“I don’t understand. A man like you could have anything, *everything*. What could you want?”

Vilimich turned and stared hard at Jethro. “I want my wife and son back. They were killed twenty-six years ago by terrorists.”

The Russian’s fat finger grabbed a small washed-out photo of his wife and son from his shirt pocket, and showed it to Jethro. Then he whispered, “I want them back more than anything I’ve ever wanted.”

Jethro’s demeanor instantly changed. His face turned white, and clutching the table in front of him, he dropped down into a chair.

“I’m sorry. I know who you are, but I never knew that about your family,” Jethro said softly. The photograph of the man’s wife and child was now permanently seared into his memory.

Vilimich carefully placed the photo back into his shirt pocket. “Most people do not know that about me. But I believe we can help each other. I’ve read your essay on 11th dimensional superstring theory realities—on quantum manufacturing and DNA recycling. On time continuum intervention,” Vilimich said intensely. “It’s your vision. You can solve our tragedies, our mutual dilemmas—with my

money. It's a perfect deal."

Jethro threw his head back and turned away, feeling sick. He looked like a man going from an extreme high to a punishing low. Now he understood why Vilimich had come to him. Regardless, the pain for Jethro was still too great to broach this subject, this far-fetched possibility that might still be centuries off technologically. Besides, he already knew it wasn't the right motive for living or for pushing transhumanism forward.

Vilimich watched him in silence, perceiving the young man's anguish. "What is it?" the Russian asked.

"Mr. Vilimich, I don't know how else to say this. My wife doesn't want to come back to this world. She told me that as she lay dying."

An empty silence filled the room as both men contemplated this.

Vilimich broke it. "Nonsense. Maybe she didn't want to then. Not when she's in pieces and dying in excruciating pain. But what about later—when everything in the world is different—when it's all energy, or living software, or created quantum fields of probabilities? And everything else that you describe and believe could eventually happen."

"That might be true," Jethro whispered, considering for an instant the odds of such a reality. *You must master the quantum universe if you want to reach the omnipotender's full potential*, he remembered Zoe saying.

Silence ensued. The conference room seemed far smaller than it had three minutes ago. Each man felt tied down, strapped.

Jethro recovered. "How exactly can I help you, Mr. Vilimich?"

"I want you to find the 11th dimensional realities you wrote about in your essay—to find a way to the outermost frontiers of science and existence. And then to search for those whom we love. To help us get to them. To rediscover them. To reanimate them. Of all people, you can make these things possible. You have the ultimate vested interest. I can give you billions of dollars for exactly that mission. We can build a nation of scientists to accomplish it. It may not follow the pure transhuman and immortality quests you wanted, but it's close enough."

Jethro winced, his stomach churning. He shook his head disparagingly.

"Close enough, Mr. Vilimich? Are you serious? Have you read the *TEF Manifesto*?"

"Yes. Yes, of course I have. I've read everything of yours. But that time has passed. That opportunity is over for the transhumanists. You won't succeed anymore. But this opportunity is here, right now, in front of you. The offer of a lifetime."

Jethro waved his arm and said, "The *TEF Manifesto* doesn't change over time. It also doesn't change because its success becomes unlikely. It's here, right now, and completely alive. Its main point—*If you love life, you will always strive to reach the most advanced form of yourself possible while protecting that life*—is perpetual. The thing you speak of, Mr. Vilimich, could be hundreds or thousands of years away, if possible at all. Furthermore, it isn't even related to you or me directly, or to the *TEF Manifesto*. Bringing back the dead—especially those presumably not cryonically frozen or preserved correctly—is very different than extending and improving the lives of those presently living."

Frustrated, Jethro shook his head and said, "What you want is just not even on the transhuman timeline right now. And it would be irresponsible to dedicate more than only a fraction of transhuman resources to it at a moment when the real goals of the movement are, literally, on the verge of collapse; when the longevity of our own lifespans are so immediately threatened. It's just not the current purpose of the transhuman mission."

"Yes, I understand that. But it's the current purpose of *my* mission. Of why I became one of the wealthiest and most powerful individuals on the planet. I want to see my family again, not just be a bankrolling devotee of transhumanism. Do you understand that? And as a recent cancer survivor, I might only have ten or twenty years left to directly attempt it. That's *my* mission."

“But your money could be used for more practical and possible goals, for near-term successes like your own immediate health and longevity. Then, at some later point, you could consider tackling the monumental task of bringing back the dead. What you want is not even reasonable just yet.”

“I didn’t get to be so successful because I was always reasonable.”

Jethro shook his head emotionally. He stood up, walked toward the window and put his right palm flat on the glass. He could see his fingers slightly shaking. He could also foresee how this conversation was going to finish. The Russian was immovable, blinded by despair, blinded by endless lonely days and nights of hurt feeding upon itself. For an instant, Jethro wondered if this forlorn fate might one day also end up his.

“Mr. Vilimich, I understand what you are saying and what you want.”

“So can you do it? I can give you billions of dollars and we’ll buy an army of scientists to find a way to my family—and to yours.”

Jethro thought about the possibilities: Zoe and her frozen hippocampus; her preserved DNA; her organs’ whereabouts; the stem cells from her umbilical cord. The allure for immediately beginning such a venture was colossally strong, as it was a possible cure to the agonizing pain from the loss of Zoe.

Then Jethro remembered the bodysurfing wave in the Bahamas.

“Even if such a complicated quest were possible in my lifetime, the answer is no,” Jethro said. “I’m sorry—it’s just not my path.”

“What?” Vilimich replied, stunned. “But this is a one-in-a-million chance for you. There won’t be another like it. You’ll never get as much money as I can give you from anywhere else. You’ll be lucky if someone gives you even a hundred dollars anymore.”

“That’s probably true.”

“So why the hell not?”

“Because it’s not what my philosophy, TEF, was created for, or what Transhuman Citizen is trying to achieve. It’s not what *I’m* trying to achieve.”

“How can you say no? You’re almost bankrupt. Your transhumanist friends have deserted you. Your movement is practically nonexistent. And most importantly, she’s gone, and you want her back. You don’t have a choice.”

Jethro turned to him sharply. “You’re wrong, Mr. Vilimich. I do have a choice. My own life, its power, and its potential are still plenty to choose from, regardless of the circumstances you think you see me in. In fact, it’s more you who lacks the choice—if you want *me* to help *you*.”

The Russian looked at the man, assiduously considering him. In a rough voice, he said, “Explain yourself.”

“I want you and your massive resources here more than any other donor or investor I’ve ever met. I like you just by looking at you. And I deeply respect what you’ve been through in life, and how you went through it, especially now that I know your tragic past. Your gifts would change everything for me. They would change everything for the movement. Transhumanism has always needed one colossal donor like yourself backing it so it could make genuine strides forward; however, I only want your donation on terms that I believe in and that I can deliver. I can only take your money on the same singular condition I offer every donor—to uphold the *TEF Manifesto* and work towards accomplishing sensible and realistic transhuman goals. And that means this: We don’t tackle goals we can’t reach before our own deaths. Perhaps more importantly, it means we don’t live for others, even our most cherished loved ones.”

“That’s foolish.”

“Why is it foolish, Mr. Vilimich?” Jethro shot back, his voice gritty, the question loaded with an aching challenge. “What do you want those things for—your son and wife alive again with you?”

“What kind of question is that? How can one answer it? It’s so obvious.”

“Yes, but your answering it is especially important. Since this transhuman movement that I’ve dedicated my life to, lost my wife and unborn child over, gave my youth for, is as much about my

philosophical integrity as anything else, and not just about...lost love," Jethro said, with difficulty.

"Are you suggesting I am not capable of philosophical integrity? Or that finding my loved ones should not be worthy?"

"I am not suggesting anything like that. But dedicating half your wealth to this organization on your terms would transform its direction and essence. And I already like and believe in its direction and essence. What you want is something very different."

"There's nothing wrong with what I want. It's honorable!" Vilimich exclaimed, slamming his clenched fist into his chest.

"I never said it isn't. What I *am* saying is that it doesn't fit with the *TEF Manifesto*. It's not in line with the current motive or mission of Transhuman Citizen. I'm sorry, Mr. Vilimich. I'll only accept your money if you believe in and support transhumanism and life extension for the right reasons—for yourself, first and foremost. And I would only accept donations that go towards those goals—reasonable ones. No one can highjack or buy our lives and motives here, no matter how much money they offer, or how powerful they are. One of the most important truths of the *TEF Manifesto* states there can be no slavery or compromise of core transhuman ideals. Even those we love most cannot change that truth," Jethro said, painfully thinking of Zoe. "This is an organization and a way of being, with a philosophy that rejects living or existing for others. And it also rejects being illogical and unreasonable."

The Russian was silent. The space inside the room continued to shrink for both men. Vilimich was not used to a man questioning his own emotions. His own intellect. His own motives. Especially these motives, so profoundly ingrained in him for decades. So acutely engulfed in his heart. Vilimich was not used to a man who cared so much about the best in himself, about the best in the universe. He was not used to a man who could love so much; who so utterly lacked fear; whose honor and will were impenetrable, like the largest oil find in the deepest, rockiest part of the planet.

Vilimich felt like he was at the southern Russian oil fields again as a young man, concocting how to make his fortune, wondering how to amass power so the peons around him could not suppress his dreams. He held his tongue—and fists—out of respect.

"I didn't understand there were wrong reasons for supporting transhumanism."

Jethro was careful now.

"I wouldn't look at it as right and wrong. There are just reasons all of us here agree to for our movement. Like wanting to gain power and live forever because we love life, and not because we are searching for something that once made us love it. We start from that point of departure. Our resources go towards that. They go towards the pursuit of our own immortality. At least, at first. The rest is still unknown. There may be possibilities to bring back loved ones, but I don't count them as real or reasonable yet because they are many decades—most likely centuries—into the future. And we have other essential priorities like staying alive and eliminating the threat of death to ourselves, which comes first and foremost. Can't you see that?"

"I don't see anything when it comes to my wife and child, except getting back to them *now*."

"But in this case, there's no other choice. You must understand the priority is now for your own life and potential, for your own ability to be able to see them again. The paramount priority is you and your survival, which is a quintessential law of the universe that cannot be broken or betrayed. Because what you need most in order to possibly see them again is time—time to evolve the transhuman cause so that all other potentialities might unfold in the future."

Vilimich disagreed. And he didn't come all the way to America to get a lesson in logic from Jethro. He came to immediately begin scientifically finding a way to his loved ones, using the best talent available on the planet to do so. Unfortunately, Jethro wasn't going to give in, he realized. He would have to break first if this man was going to help him, and this was something the Russian was not prepared to do.

"Furthermore," Jethro continued, "I don't mislead people or lie. And I especially won't promise

something I can't give. I don't even know if what you want is really possible. It may not be. You have to accept that."

Jethro added, whispering, "We *both* have to accept that."

The conference room darkened as the sun outside disappeared behind clouds. The two men stared at each other for a long time. Their eyes became luminous, reflecting both the room's changing light and the emerging shadows.

"Are you sure, Mr. Knights? This is your only chance. You don't want to reconsider my offer?" Vilimich asked one last time.

Jethro did not. He stood up straight, unafraid. Transhuman Citizen was dying, as were his chances of immortality. And Vilimich's funding could renew everything. It would mean the birth of Transhumania. But then it wouldn't be Transhumania anymore. It would be an abomination. Another direction towards a sure death. Jethro knew this was not a moment to bend or compromise. Too much was at stake. Too much that would never be forgiven. There would be other ways to succeed. Better ways, if not more difficult—much more difficult. He just had to be patient and find them. Pure TEF is what it is and, like mathematics, can never be altered or compromised. Not by love or loss—not even by death.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Vilimich. I don't believe I can help you, given your aims. I won't promise that kind of thing for exactly that kind of reason. If you change your mind, and want to do it my way, please get back in touch with me."

There was silence in the room. Both men were overwhelmed and exhausted with raw emotion.

Vilimich watched Jethro—not exactly watched him, but felt him. Secretly, he almost wished Jethro would try to exploit him, finagle him, somehow con him out of the money he was offering. That would've given him a reason to disagree with the man, to dislike him. So many people had tried to swindle resources from him in the past for their own aims. Any practical business person would've at least entertained such an option, Vilimich thought. But not the young man in front of him; he was more honest than a saint, and more unyielding than a force of nature.

The Russian turned and slowly lumbered to the door, his giant shoulders slouching. He put on his hat and walked out of the office without uttering another word. His chauffeur opened the door to his limousine, and they drove off.

Jethro sat down at the conference table and put his hands on his head. He sat there for a whole hour, lost in thought, agonizing, thinking about Zoe, about TEF, about Vilimich. Finally, Janice Mantikas came in and asked what he wanted to do about his 3:30 P.M. meeting with the Vantage University genetics researcher; he had recently returned Jethro's lab equipment after bowing to pressure from the school's president.

Jethro strained to look at his watch. His secretary noticed how much effort it took.

Almost inaudibly, he said, "Tell him I'm leaving now and will be five minutes late."

## Chapter 24

Four days later, Jethro Knights' cell phone beeped from a new incoming message. He clicked on the text:

*You stubborn bastard. I look at you and feel like I'm looking in the mirror. I sold half my stake in Calico—and wired 10 billion U.S. dollars into your Cayman Island donor account. Use the money how you like. For the right goddamn reasons. Good luck.*

*Vilimich*

A moment later Jethro's phone rang. It was his secretary.

"Jethro, the president of Phoenix Bank in the Cayman Islands is on the line, asking if a massive deposit of billions of dollars was expected, or if it was a mistake. He's suggesting maybe it's a computer glitch, or even a jokester's hack."

"It's correct, Janice!" Jethro shouted. "Tell him it's correct. It's from Frederick Vilimich. I'm driving to the airport and flying to the Caymans right now to confirm and hide it. Make sure no one finds out about this. Not a word to anyone."

Nine hours later, Jethro was in the Cayman Islands. The president of Phoenix Bank, a loyal Transhuman Citizen member, met him at the airport in a bulletproof Mercedes. Over dinner, Jethro explained to him what had occurred, and they formulated a plan for how to best keep the money safe and confidential.

The next morning, in a rented private jet, Jethro flew around the world to Vanuatu, Singapore, Lebanon, Panama, Maldives, Djibouti, and Switzerland. He spent two weeks establishing bank accounts for various pop-up companies and corporations in out-of-the-way places, acting as the sole manager. He made up odd business names like Antidy Enterprises, Amerigon LLC, and Dumcros Inc. The money was wired in small, varying portions to all his hidden accounts belonging to the companies so it could never be frozen, tracked, or calculated by the NFSA or anyone else on the planet. Even the Phoenix Bank president wasn't aware of the account names or numbers, as third-party escrow accounts were used to hide and deflect all traceable sources. Jethro sent secondary codes and addresses to Mr. Vilimich, as the only other person capable of locating the money. But even *he* wasn't allowed to know everything or control anything. On every account, there was a different company, a different address, a different identification number, a different mission statement. The ten billion dollars was split in a hundred different ways, all with digital tentacles that led only to Jethro Knights.

When the money was safe, he emailed Vilimich:

*Dear Mr. Vilimich,*

*Thank you. The money is safe and being put to good use for the right reasons. I'll be in touch as the transhuman mission progresses. Furthermore, you have my pledge that I will not forget that picture in your pocket.*

*Jethro Knights*

The same day, in a hotel in Panama, Jethro went online and bought a used business jet capable of flying a dozen people comfortably between continents. He ordered it flown to Panama City by a newly hired full-time pilot with a longstanding transhuman affiliation. Jethro employed a small construction crew to tear out half the plane's interior and replace it with an office, a conference table, three work stations, and two bunk beds. It was almost like building the sailboat again, he thought.

The same week, he boarded a commercial plane back to Palo Alto and emptied his apartment, throwing away all nonessential items. Much of it was Zoe Bach's stuff. There were other things too: a crib, a baby jogging stroller, a book on choosing baby names. He placed them all into a rusty blue trash dumpster outside, trying to restrain his anguish and just make it through the day. From then on, he would be living on his plane, or in a hotel, or wherever. He didn't want a home again—not until he built it in Transhumania.

Jethro ordered his secretary to catch up on the past rent for the foreign offices and to send the landlords flattering gifts. Beijing, Paris, Buenos Aires, and Sydney were all two months behind on lease payments, and evictions had been threatened. Jethro also instructed his secretary to immediately prepare the groundwork for opening new offices in Delhi, Panama City, Vancouver, Tokyo, Dubai,

Moscow, and Johannesburg, complete with new transhumanist hires.

“But Janice, let’s plan to close the Palo Alto headquarters *publicly*. Make sure the media finds out somehow. Slip them an anonymous email. Let’s move to a much smaller place, like a studio office in downtown San Francisco. Pick a cockroach-infested building in a shoddy part of town. That’ll give them something to squawk about. Oh, and effective immediately, double the salaries of the three employees who stayed, including yourself. But do it quietly. All *very* quietly.”

“Jethro, this is going to make huge news. That’s a staggering amount of money. America and the world are sure to find out.”

“No, they’re not. Listen to me very carefully. No one is to know about this money. Not for a long while. I’m not even going to tell Preston Langmore.”

“But the country will see what comes of it.”

“Oh, they will see for sure. They’ll see it when we steal their best people away from them and beat them at their own game by building from scratch a new nation that rivals anything on this planet. For now, however, we’re going to play dead. Let the NFSA and anti-transhumanists lose guard. Let them think they’ve won the War on Transhumanism. Then we’ll resurrect in a way they can’t fight against.”

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Six days later, Transhuman Citizen’s Palo Alto headquarters was officially closed. Janice Mantikas didn’t need to contact the press about the event. Reverend Belinas’ people, who spied on Jethro Knights’ office every day, notified the media and insisted they cover it.

Belinas placed proud calls to IMN, the *USA Daily Tribune*, and other media outfits, issuing boastful quotes. “We are cleaning up our cities. We are cleaning up America. The transhumanists wanted to take away all that is good and human in our nation. Thankfully, the people have not allowed that. Our faiths have not allowed that. *God* has not allowed that. Together, we have saved our humanity.”

IMN sent out a news crew, which filmed boxes being carried from the defunct Palo Alto office and put into a small, beat-up moving truck. The cameramen followed the truck to an outdated sixteen-story building in downtown San Francisco, where Jethro’s three employees were holing up in a small studio. Paint was peeling off the sides of the mid-rise, and people wearing inexpensive suits smoked cigarettes in front of its squeaky, revolving entrance door. The manager of the building was interviewed by a reporter, questioned what it was like on the ninth floor, where Transhuman Citizen was renting by the week.

“Really, it’s where many of the city’s struggling outfits move, often when they just need a studio or a one-room office. Usually companies there don’t last long; they often fold within weeks. It’s what we in the renting business call ‘a transient floor.’”

In addition to the humiliating press coverage, public speculation ran rampant that the transhuman movement, once so prominent in science and avant-garde culture, was going into permanent hibernation. Everywhere, scientists and technologists abandoned their transhuman ties and ambitions. Life extension and human enhancement organizations across the country simply disappeared, many without a trace. Discrimination and ridicule against transhumanism became openly encouraged by police, religious organizations, and conservative outfits in the media. Criminal lawsuits and civil complaints were filed against those like Jethro Knights and Dr. Preston Langmore, who tried to keep their organizations and missions afloat. Anti-transhumanists laughed, saying the immortality fad had run its natural course.

IMN interviewed a colorful pastor from Redeem Church’s San Francisco branch. He was quoted as saying, “Of course, the transhumanists lost. Their radicalism was doomed from the start. What did they

want to do? Replace us with robots, computers, and all things egotistically man-made. How absurd. Every one of us is a sinner, and our great goal in life is to work towards being forgiven for our sins so that we may one day unite with our Lord in heaven—and not perpetuate our devilish egos on Earth.”

A month later, Amanda and Gregory Michaelson invited Reverend Belinas over to their vacation beach house in the Hamptons, to celebrate their successes. It was an intimate dinner, commencing with toasts of a limited reserve Vibolta Champagne. The Michaelson's new Filipino butler wore cumbersome white gloves, accidentally fumbling the main entree, Duck a l'Orange—one of six courses. A decadent Portuguese Almond Blancmange with caramel glaze arrived as the last dish. A 1961 Burgundy Pinot Noir, picked from her father's cellar, accompanied the feast.

Dinner prompted much gossipy chit-chat. The drunker the trio became, the more they gregariously complained about the tenuous state of the world. Gregory ranted about his lazy constituents who didn't want to work, just wanted food stamps galore and endless financial handouts. Amanda cursed the butler's clumsiness and the gardener's laziness. Belinas complained about the lack of new donors for his church, citing the devastated global economy. But each ultimately laughed about their squabbles. It was their way of parading their high-mannered superiority. They were surefire winners, their popularity and success at an all-time high.

In a recent front-page article about Reverend Belinas and Senator Michaelson, the *USA Daily Tribune* wrote:

*The team that preserved our glowing humanity. They stopped the transhumanists from robbing us of ourselves.*

The article was accompanied by a huge color photo spread of the preacher and Gregory, concentrating on important documents strewn all over a large hickory table in the U.S. Capitol.

Across America, the transhumanists had disbanded. Those few left were outcasts, shoved to the fringe of society. The NFSA had succeeded in creating a national environment where “transhumanism” was not a curious word bound to the future, but a filthy one cast into the gutter. Similar to the words “heroin” or “prostitution.”

Belinas reminded Gregory during a final toast in the Hamptons that there was still important work to accomplish. With the sound of the ocean's waves thumping the shore in the background, he spoke of Gregory's future as if it were his own. Gregory didn't mind. He knew better than to upset his best friend and mentor. Or also, his now-loving wife. Amanda smiled at him, generously pouring affection and praise on him that night. A run for the U.S. Presidency was next, Gregory admitted to them almost shyly.

The cheerful evening drove well past midnight, with each of them basking in the light of their triumphs, each of them feeling righteous and untouchable. When they awoke the next morning, however, each was dreary and hungover, feeling aged; they needed more prescription medications and escape from their aching bodies. Their moods were dour. Each thought begrudgingly, I'm growing old and will die someday. And no matter how much money, power, or public stature they possessed or acquired in life, they could do nothing about it.

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When the interior construction work on Jethro Knights' jet was finished, he rendezvoused with it in Mexico on an obscure, isolated airstrip in Oaxaca. Later that night, he leaned against one of the jet's landing tires, exhausted from the rush of hiding Transhuman Citizen's new resources and downsizing the group's San Francisco presence. Jethro stared at the chicken taco in his hand, thinking he should be

hungrier and ready for sleep. Instead, excitement edged in him.

Finally, I can begin the search for Transhumania, he thought.

The search for the perfect place to achieve immortality and other transhuman goals was complex and demanding. Foremost, it needed to be extremely isolated. Scarred and flabbergasted by how transhumanism and his organization had disappeared in America in just a few short years, Jethro wanted a place for their rebirth far outside the reach of the planet's strongest societies and their governments. He needed transhumanism and its new nation to be fully exempt from the rest of civilization and its ideas of right and wrong. Jethro was not concerned with belonging to the human race any longer or adhering to any of its accepted standards. He hardly identified himself with the human species anymore. His mindset took him far outside that concept.

Jethro felt he should be a genuine philosophical machine, following the most expedient path to immortality. That machine needed to plug in somewhere where nothing and no one would interrupt it and cut off its power. Eventually, they would try. He knew it. The world was too afraid of what he wanted. The obvious choice for the transhuman nation was an island akin to a massive sailboat, he thought, fondly recalling the isolation of his circumnavigation. The ocean surrounding him could now be a security and a barrier.

The island should not be too large or unmanageable. He could build housing and research structures upward towards the sky. It needed an efficient harbor to dock boats for supplies. And an airport for transportation. He could construct them. The island shouldn't be populated at all. Only with scientists and staff loyal to the mission. The island needed to be something that Transhuman Citizen could legally buy and own outright, unconditionally. The country and person selling it to them must be able to do that without interference or qualms from another country like America. The island should have some natural resources; however, enough money could overcome that. So maybe that was not really necessary, he thought. It should be free of natural disasters and weather issues, at least to some extent. But again, those could be dealt with in other ways.

Jethro already knew what he planned for Transhumania: three circular skyscrapers of different heights, interconnected by multiple sky bridges. Each building would be covered in varying hues of glass siding that resembled a computer chip's inner circuitry. During the day, the skyscrapers would mirror their surrounding environment: the sky, the sun, the clouds, the ocean, the city, and the people. During the night, the towers would light up and blend together, forming a brilliant mountain of luminosity. The trio of skyscrapers would create a riveting symbol and manifestation of a futuristic transcendent species and its new world.

Jethro intended to have one skyscraper for science, one for technology, and one where the researchers would live, play, and relax. Everything the nation built and produced would astonish and lead in functional innovation. He was determined to create an extraordinary environment like no other place on Earth, where creative human enhancement and life extension research was the highest goal and motive. Where everyone was someone, and the best in the world at what they did. He wanted the best transhuman scientists, technology innovators, computer programmers, medical doctors, and researchers. He wanted the best engineers, designers, builders, artists, and philosophers. He also wanted the best military experts and weapons specialists to defend the nation.

He wanted a place where everyone would make a solemn pledge: to keep their beliefs and practices in religion and spirituality—if they existed at all—completely to themselves, out of the domain and influence of the public, and never letting it interfere with their work. Furthermore, he wanted people to believe in and be prepared to defend the transhuman mission and essential tenants of the *TEF Manifesto*.

This was, in a strange way, to be a utopia—a world designed as one could imagine and dream it. It must be the best place to live on the planet. People must yearn to want to go there, to ditch their homelands and become an intimate part of its great task. They must feel endowed, inspired, transported. They must believe passionately in the sense of purpose, of belonging, of entitlement, of

life-giving commitment to Transhumania.

After dinner, Jethro boarded his plane and powered up his computer to browse satellite images of Earth on the Internet. His search parameters for a suitable site for Transhumania turned up islands off West Africa, the Caribbean, and Tonga in the South Pacific.

West Africa had too much war and strife, he thought. It might scare off scientists whom he needed to live and work there. The Caribbean was too America-friendly, too near in proximity to the NFSA. Tonga was a Christian nation. They wouldn't allow a non-religious nation to just break off and be independent. Jethro was adamant about needing his own sovereign state. There was no exception to that.

For three hours, he researched exotic, uninhabited islands and found many. Unfortunately, they all belonged to someone. All had ties to the powerful A10, the ten wealthiest countries in the world: China, Russia, England, Japan, Germany, India, Australia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, and the U.S.A. The A10 gave the rest of the world nearly all its policy dictates. It was critical for Transhumania's success to not be a part of any political affinities, or any geographical domain, or any existing culture. Jethro didn't want to be within close reach of anything anti-transhumanist. Was that possible? he wondered. Was there a piece of land like that on the planet?

With no answer, he shut down his computer and went outside into the warm night air. He walked toward the end of an isolated airstrip. Beyond it was a small sandy beach. He wandered along the water's edge underneath the stars, considering his dilemma. When he came to the end of the beach and rounded the bay's corner, he saw in the distance a massive array of lights emanating from a ten-story tower atop the ocean. It was a huge oil platform as long as a football field, lit up in every corner, creating energy for the human race—a floating world of production. Jethro flashed back to the “seasteading” project he saw while sailing near Singapore, a trial run of the first floating community.

His search for the perfect island nation was over. He didn't need to find or buy one. He was going to build one from scratch. The largest one ever designed. A floating nation that could support tens of thousands of transhuman scientists.

## Chapter 25

It was the most unexpected, most superlative meeting Rachael Burton had ever attended. She sat across from Jethro Knights in a small café in Norway, suspiciously eying the worn notebook in his hands. At forty-nine years old, Burton was the world's undisputed leader of designing and building oil platforms. Her work had been featured dozens of times in popular trade journals and magazines. Her *curriculum vitae* was eight pages long. The engineers and architects on her team were the most talented in the field, tripping over each other for the chance to work for her.

Burton was disenchanted with her career, however. She believed her potential and expertise were unrealized. She longed to get her company away from the energy world, and instead build communities on her platforms: floating cities. In graduate school in Holland, she was the first to term this “seasteading.” The cabinets in her office were filled with dream project blueprints she'd designed but never built. University islands. Moveable medical centers. Skyscrapers jettisoning out of the water, with immaculate gardens and jungles around them. Planned resorts that floated from continent to continent, not subject to any laws or nation. Or even to bad weather; they could simply motor out of the way of storms. Developers could choose anything in cities like that—everything was possible. Unfortunately, projects like she envisioned were not even being considered anymore. The clobbered global economy made the enormous budgets required for it impossible.

After returning to his jet plane with his epiphany, Jethro Knights discovered Burton's website when he did an Internet search for “floating city.” He scoured her content for hours, examining every

futuristic drawing he could find. Jethro didn't know design ideas like that existed. They were brilliant and daring. Highrises shooting upwards toward the sky in extravagant precision, yet bound to the sea. Some of her seasteading projects had airstrips and stadiums. Others had golf courses and water parks weaving their way in between soaring housing, commercial, and industrial complexes.

Burton seemed the perfect architect to design Transhumania. She was an outspoken atheist and had loose ties to European transhumanist groups. Then Jethro read a recent article about her. There was a catch. There usually was with visionaries like her. She was tricky to work with, even impossible some said. She possessed a manner of complete and uncompromising ego. The article's headline read: *Reatlan Development Drops Famed Architect: Burton Scares Off Another Project.*

“Don’t tell *me* ideas, grandpa—I tell *you* ideas!” she was quoted by the magazine as saying. She had been shouting at an elderly billionaire client over a disagreement about a building’s facade. The stunned man said nothing, but quickly instructed security to escort her out of his office, canceling her contract five minutes later.

After staying up all night, filling his notebook with drawings and ideas from her website, Jethro was ready to meet Burton in person and discuss the construction of Transhumania. She was near Oslo, where her latest oil platform was being finished. He called her secretary in the morning and scheduled a meeting. He departed the next day from Mexico to meet her in the Norwegian capital.

At first glance, upon greeting each other in the far corner of an intimate Scandinavian cafe, Jethro liked Burton—a lot. She was a short Dutch woman, barely five feet tall, but muscular and intense. Her movements were animated and energetic, yet sharply controlled. Jethro noticed that her green eyes never left his, not even for a moment.

“Thank you for meeting me on such short notice,” he said, sitting down with her at a private table.

She nodded without saying a word, appearing acutely standoffish.

“It must be nice to work here. Oslo is beautiful, and the sky has an amazing hue of blue to it. Don’t you think?”

Burton watched him, maintaining her silence, her pupils getting smaller. She turned and saw the barista and cook—friends of hers—across the café in the kitchen doorway; both of them stared at Jethro, trying to ascertain if he was the famous renegade transhumanist.

Jethro waited politely, casually, for her to respond. He was long since accustomed to such reservation from people.

When Burton turned back to him, she had an eyebrow raised. “Mr. Knights, would you just tell me what you want? I know exactly who you are, and I can tell trouble when I see it.”

Jethro grinned, knowing this person was the right one for the job.

“Okay. But you must swear to secrecy and be true to your word, whether you take the job I offer or not.”

Burton looked coarsely at him. “Fine—you have it. My word is like granite. I’m sure you know that if you knew enough to fly all the way here to meet me.”

“Thank you.”

She waited, liking him too, but highly skeptical.

“It’s thought the transhuman movement is dying,” Jethro said quietly, “and that it’s on its last breath. It might be, however, that for my organization, Transhuman Citizen, nothing could be further from the truth. It was recently given a sizeable amount of resources, enough to build a sovereign country from scratch. I’d like you to be the architect of the largest seasteading city ever designed and constructed. It will be called Transhumania—the transhuman nation—a place where the world’s best scientists, technologists, and futurists can carry out research to achieve their life extension and human enhancement goals.”

Burton leaned forward, intently serious, gripping her hands on the edge of the table for support.

“I’ve read in various papers you’re flat broke and they shut you down in America. That your so-called ‘Transhuman Revolution’ is dead. And now you want to build an entirely new nation?”

“You look like the kind of person who doesn't believe everything she reads in the papers.”

“These are strange times—and you may be the strangest person who has emerged from them.”

“There may be one even stranger,” Jethro said. He raised his eyebrows and tilted his head suggestively.

The architect slowly smiled. She leaned back and asked plainly, “What do you plan to build this new nation with? Other than charisma and wit?”

“With your skills and my ideas. And about a dozen secret international bank accounts with nine zeros behind each of them. Would you like to go online and look at some?”

Burton saw Jethro Knights was serious. Damn serious, she thought. She waited a moment, gulped, then felt the excitement in her begin to soar. It was hard to believe, because it was certainly too good to be true. Rigidly, she said, “Okay, I'm listening. Go on.”

“I no longer want to waste resources competing against American and other anti-transhumanist governments to achieve immortality and the transhuman mission. A floating city should shield transhumanists and the people I need away from those forces, giving me certain worldwide legal protections. The city will have to be built to house approximately 10,000 scientists and their immediate families. You'll have to build up, because I want most of the city open for creating green spaces, jungles, and parks—so people like living there. Actually, so they *love* living there. These will be very picky people, some of the smartest in the world. They'll want the best of everything, and they deserve it. I want them to be enthralled with every bit of their new home. I want the city big enough to have an airport for passenger jets, but small enough to comfortably ride a bike around in twenty minutes. I want to build the most modern metropolis on the planet, a utopia for transhumanists and their research.”

Rachael Burton couldn't contain her excitement any longer. She threw her head back ecstatically and stood up. She knew Jethro's reputation for integrity. It was ironclad. This man wouldn't approach her if he didn't have enough money or if he wasn't ready.

“You're serious? About this city? About me building it? About this working?”

“Yes, completely,” Jethro said, staring at her. “And it *will* work.”

“How much money do you *really* have?” Burton asked cautiously. “Because it's going to take a lot of money.”

“About five billion U.S. dollars for the construction. All cash.”

Burton sat down and closed her eyes for a moment. That was plenty. He's done his math, she thought. A moment later, she threw her fists on the table in triumph and said, “That's incredible! I don't know how you did it, but goddamn those closed-minded bastards. Let's turn them into hawkers.”

Jethro smirked. “Exactly. So can you do it?”

“Yes, I can do it! I've been waiting my whole life to do it, and you *know* it. That's why you're here.”

They spent the next seven days drawing out initial ideas, asking each other thousands of questions, and battling over plans. How long should the airstrip be? Where will the desalination plant be located? What is the best way to eliminate the smell of the sewer system? How do we control buoyancy of the city's platform? Can we make energy from the ocean's swells? Would a wind farm be too noisy? Should there be a mini subway system? Where will the best restaurants go? What kinds of trees and shrubbery can be imported? Who will run the grocery and hardware stores? Where should schools be located for the scientists' families? How many fitness centers should there be? What size military installations should be built? Should there be underwater weapon-launching pads? How tall do we build the skyscrapers? What size cargo ships should the docks accommodate? What kind of propulsion will the city use to maneuver across oceans?

They slept little, working nonstop hours in small coffee shops and in Jethro's hotel suite, designing Transhumania. Finally, when preliminary ideas were sketched out, Jethro and Burton decided on a country where they could begin the construction. Liberia was chosen.

“They're the best for this kind of project,” Burton insisted. “West Africa is far off the radar screen

for the rest of the world, so hopefully, there won't be any troublesome interruptions by the media or the NFSA. Besides, Liberia has cheap labor, good weather, and lots of beach space to launch this puppy. It's going to be at least ten soccer fields long, you know. We're going to need lots and lots of space. Launching the city into the ocean will be the trickiest part."

"Whatever you think. Just remain discreet and throw all the resources you need at it. I want the platform section up and floating in six months."

Burton looked at him and growled, "I want it up and floating in *five* months."

Jethro nodded, grinning. The following day, he told Burton he'd meet up with her in two weeks in Liberia.

"My secretary will be in touch with accounts and payments for you later today. Just let her know what you need and what items I have to approve."

"Where are you going?"

"All over, Rachael. To every nook on the planet. To start recruiting the most talented and capable people in the world to become citizens of Transhumania."

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Nearly five months later, on an isolated beach in Liberia, finishing touches on the platform of Transhumania were being completed. An army of 15,000 workers labored upon it in the blistering African sun. The structure was twenty-five stories tall, almost half of which would remain underwater once it was launched into the ocean. When viewed from miles away, the platform appeared as a titanic silver box, like something that crashed down from outer space.

In the middle was a vast gaping hole where the skyscrapers' foundations would eventually be cast, giving the platform stability and weight to counter its sixty-million-ton buoyancy. The pit looked massive, like an immense mining operation in scorching heat. Roads were welded into the sides of the steel crater to allow trucks full of material to drive in and out. Everyone on the platform wore dark sunglasses and scarves to protect themselves from the heat and sharp light radiating off the ubiquitous metal.

The airport strip was the first job Jethro Knights wanted completed. Asphalted only three days ago, Jethro's pilot stressed with perspiration as he prepared to land his jet at the far right of the platform's east side. Jethro stood behind the pilot, curiously watching, bracing himself with one hand on the ceiling of the cockpit. Preston Langmore, informed only two weeks before about the platform's existence, sat nervously looking out his window in the back of the jet, his lips tightly shut.

"Don't bite your tongue off, Preston," Jethro shouted back to him.

When the jet came to a stop after a successful landing, the pilot nodded his approval.

"Well done," Jethro said. "That wasn't so bad. We had two hundred meters to spare."

"It looked shorter from the air, sir. That was pretty basic."

"It's the same international length as you're used to. It just looks shorter because of the drop-offs."

Rachael Burton and her entourage of architects and engineers, including the platform's foreman, walked towards Jethro's plane, clutching their hats and scarves so they wouldn't blow away in the wind. There were greetings over the roar of the jets, then the group proceeded to the temporary mobile unit near the runway.

The builders launched right into him. "Glad you're here, sir. Loads of questions for you."

"Fire away. That's why I came." It was almost three weeks since Jethro had last visited. They barraged him with blueprint spreads and nonstop questions, requesting permission to alter designs on existing plans or to start new construction.

After an hour, with his dirty finger pointing at a drawing, the foreman said, "Jethro, atop the

desalination plant, where the park and statues are planned, we're thinking we need to raise it about six stories for larger ships docking on the harbor side. So they don't damage it during any swells, when they tie up and unload cargo."

"Okay."

"Want to go up there so you can see what I mean? It's a major change."

"Sure."

They walked outside, towards the southwest corner of the platform where the structure was located. It was one of twenty-two buildings going up on Transhumania, many of whose skeletons were beginning to substantially show. Atop the desalination plant—which Jethro christened "Memorial Vista"—would be the two-acre park, garden, and monuments that were to be dedicated to Nathan Cohen, Zoe Bach, and others who perished at the hands of anti-transhumanists. Jethro wanted it created as a place to give speeches, as a point to rally around, and as a haven for watching sunrises, sunsets, and the nearby soaring towers—a luring meditative sanctuary with energy to re-power and revitalize. Stainless steel benches, Zen boulders, and tall oak trees were going to intermix with statues lining the perimeter of the area. A dramatic shooting fountain encircled by rose bushes, herbs, and evergreens would dominate the center of the park.

The views from Memorial Vista were riveting. The thousands of hired workers—many from India, China, and the Congo—looked like small ants. Jethro liked going up there to watch the tractors and cement trucks speeding across the platform. Preston Langmore was speechless when he witnessed the hive of activity from atop the proposed park. Jethro's dream was finally happening, he thought. He couldn't help but think of how impressed Zoe Bach would've been with the construction of Transhumania and with how far Transhuman Citizen had evolved—and how unlikely it all was. She would've got her world-class surgery center.

Langmore eyed Jethro, wondering how bad it was for him. The last time they had spoken to each other about Zoe was five weeks ago, when Jethro had confessed that losing her was still intensely difficult for him. Langmore remembered how the muscles on the young man's face had tightened, how his eyes had instantly turned blood-red.

"She comes into my dreams all the time," Jethro told him in a whisper.

Langmore took a chance. "That's because she's still out there, Jethro. And you can find her someday, somehow."

"No!" Jethro fired back.

He didn't want to think that way. Hopelessly metaphysical. That timeline was too far out. Too technologically complex. Too mystical and quantum. And it required far too much hope. Right now there was just grief—and the battle to stay alive and evolve as rapidly as possible.

"It's dangerous to think that way, Preston," Jethro said, his tone so sharp it announced the end of the conversation.

Langmore remembered that dialogue while standing on Memorial Vista, watching Jethro contain the hurt. He felt fatherly towards the brokenhearted man. He wished he could do something for him, but there was little that could ease that depth of agony.

Eventually, Langmore turned his thoughts back to the platform, observing the construction. The workers below them lived in makeshift tents, spread out along the north side of the airport strip and on the beach underneath the structure. A docking harbor bore a 200-foot crane above it, which lifted supplies and huge machinery onto the site. On Transhumania's south side, a 50,000-gallon fuel tank and a 100,000-gallon water reservoir were welded into the outer walls of the platform. On the flats of the proposed sports stadium, a temporary hospital was erected for injured and sick workers. Adjacent to the half-finished wind farm was an enormous cafeteria with numerous food stalls. Portable blue toilet structures were everywhere.

The work was endless: Twenty-four hours a day, there was a symphony of hammering, drilling, welding, grinding, and shouting. There was no break from the movement; sprawling bodies and their machines zipped tirelessly around the platform. The sheer creation process was a marvel to behold.

“What you’re building looks like the pyramids,” Langmore shouted on Memorial Vista over the construction noises.

“That’s true,” yelled Burton back. “I just hope we end up better than the pharaohs.”

“What do you think of the schedule?” Jethro asked Burton.

“We’re almost right on target. I’d beat my superintendent if I could get him to build faster, but he’s a decent fellow. His diplomacy skills with 15,000 hired laborers are mind-boggling. He speaks Urdu and Malay Chinese in the same sentence. Then caps it off with French pleasantries or English profanities when needed.”

“I’m off again later tonight for the recruitment process,” Jethro said. “I’ll be back in nine days. I’m leaving Langmore here to help you configure the research skyscrapers. He’ll fill you in on various laboratory requirements, especially the nuclear accelerator, the photon generators, and the various fusion chambers. They need to be built to exact specifications. Nothing can be off even a millimeter. Langmore will put you in touch with all the specialist contractors.”

“Yeah, understood. That’s fine—you’re not needed. Langmore, welcome aboard.”

Jethro continued, “Many of the scientists with whom I’m speaking are excited. Nearly all will want to visit the city first, though, to make sure it’s the real thing. They’ll especially want to examine their new facilities before committing to anything.”

“Of course. The first fifty stories of housing and laboratories will be up within six weeks, right after floating the platform next month. They can outfit their offices themselves later.”

“Where did research show the wind farms best positioned?”

“As we thought, close to the airport. We’re going to do sewers and the mini industrial park near there as well.”

“Okay. On the northwest side, out of the ocean views from the hotel and its suites?”

“Way out of the way. You won’t know it’s there once we put in the trees. Going to be a bona fide jungle surrounding it.”

“Fine. Let’s talk next Tuesday. Call me anytime with problems.”

Jethro left on his jet that evening, and headed for the world’s premier technology university in Massachusetts. Awaiting him were dozens of confidential appointments with professors and graduate students, many of whom were the leading authorities and upcoming stars in their fields.

Spread between Transhuman Citizen’s dozen international offices, Janice Mantikas and her legion of newly hired employees worked indefatigably researching and locating the most promising scientists around the world. No corner or outpost on the globe was overlooked from Europe to Asia, from South America to Africa, from Australia to North America. Once it was determined that a scientist was a good match for Transhumania, Jethro made personal contact with them. His days and nights—many spent in flight on his jet—were nonstop marathons of meetings, phone calls, writing emails, making computer presentations, preparing speeches, and mailing out secret Transhumania information packages and contracts.

Jethro mastered his task of pitching the spectacular possibilities of the transhuman nation to his chosen candidates. His invitation to share in the rebirth of the transhuman mission and its life extension goals was compelling, exciting, and novel. Part of his presentation was done in 3D modeling on a holographic screen that shot out of his laptop computer. The state-of-the-art technology Burton’s company provided was impressively futuristic.

At the end of meetings with candidates, Jethro always showed them live footage beamed from cameras installed on Transhumania’s platform. The scientists watched, dumbfounded.

“Are those all people?” they asked.

“Yes, they certainly are—and these steel skeletons are the skyscrapers,” Jethro answered, and

pointed with his index finger. “You’d be living right about there. The most modern buildings in the world. Every luxury and convenience you can imagine: spas, five-star restaurants, botanical gardens, farmers’ markets, an entertainment plaza, a world-class performing arts center. Then over there would be your offices and laboratories. No expense spared on your research equipment. The most sophisticated on the planet—I guarantee it.”

Many of the invited scientists initially relished the idea of the floating transhuman city. The place sounded extraordinary to them. People were also excited that the movement wasn’t dead; that Jethro made good on his promise to not let Transhuman Citizen be defeated. That hardly changed many people’s blunt skepticism and caution, however. Hard questions remained for those invited to join Transhumania: How could Jethro Knights afford it? How could he promise such amazing research in such unprecedeted facilities? With whose permission? Certainly America and the other A10 countries wouldn’t allow it.

Jethro responded that America and the A10 had nothing to do with transhumanism anymore, at least not on Transhumania. Once scientists arrived there, he promised hassle-free lives from bossy governments and others that disapprove of transhumanist ways. The United Nations decreed three decades ago that rules and ownership 200 miles away from any land masses on the planet do not exist.

“Out there on Transhumania, we are under our own stars and navigation,” Jethro declared. “It’s free territory.”

Additionally, he promised the scientists amazing salaries, stellar healthcare, and citizenship to Transhumania if people desired. For their children, there would be competitive schools, sports groups, piano tutors, French classes, tennis lessons, and swim teams. Dozens of varied restaurants and cafes would serve organic, sustainable, and cruelty-free foods. Coffee shops, juice bars, and drinking pubs would be ubiquitous. Movie theaters, art galleries, fitness centers, libraries, science and technology museums, and shopping centers would dot the city. Innovative designers would set up furniture and clothing outlets, including those that created products and garments with the latest intelligent materials capable of bio-monitoring the body. Whatever you wanted or needed, no matter how far-fetched; it would all be there. Jethro laid out the promise of an ideal, advanced society, the chance to belong to a country with everything going for it.

His hiring policy was simple. He didn’t give a damn where you came from, or what color you were, or with whom you had sex, or what gender you were, or if you had disabilities, or whether you were a criminal or not. But if you were hired for a position, and you failed to meet the goals assigned to you, or if you hindered other hires from meeting the goals assigned to them, then you would be fired and forced off Transhumania at once. There were no labor unions allowed. No workers’ compensation. No welfare. No freebies. In short, there was no pity, or even pretense at pity. There was just usefulness—or not. And if you didn’t like it, or didn’t agree with it, then you didn’t belong on Transhumania. Every contract of every scientist who wanted to join bore this severe language, as well as their consensual agreement to uphold the tenants of the *TEF Manifesto* and the core mission of transhumanism.

On a blistering morning in the middle of May, thirty-six tugboats from all over West Africa began pulling Transhumania on its sleds off the beach and into the sea. Over the next night, divers finalized the welding and bolting of the platform’s eight independent keels, each one bearing a 40,000 horsepower diesel engine inside it for maneuvering across oceans. The following day, Transhumania was afloat and mobile on its own power.

So far, photography and the media were strictly disallowed aboard or within five miles of the platform. The sole exception was a cameraman working directly for Jethro, documenting the construction. But weeks after the launch, when the world and the media began confirming rumors of a floating city being built off Africa—via shoddy pictures of the platform appearing on the Internet, taken without permission by cell phones from manual laborers—Jethro scheduled a press conference in Cape Town, South Africa. He planned to announce his transhuman nation to the world and to share images of

the seasteading city with the media.

A week in advance, Jethro began preparing his speech. It was to be an uncompromising swat at the face of the human race, announcing the bold return of transhumanism.

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“Goddamn it!” cried Senator Gregory Michaelson, two days before the Transhumania press conference. “Where the hell did Jethro Knights get all that money? Did you see the size of that floating thing? That takes lots of money to build.”

His outburst caught even Reverend Belinas by surprise; the preacher eyed him with hostility. They were having an emergency NFSA meeting in Washington, D.C. Three other senators, two generals, an admiral, a CIA director, Gregory, the preacher, and six top NFSA officials sat around a large, antique maple table overlooking the Potomac River. In the past four months, on orders from the White House, the NFSA had begun the thorny process of downsizing. All major American agencies were going through cuts. The U.S. Government could no longer afford such behemoth operations without prompting a default of its national debt. Besides, the NFSA’s core mission of stamping out the transhumanists had already been trumpeted as an overwhelming success. Many people considered it dated news. The President had publicly announced that federal resources would best be spent elsewhere, like on welfare or Medicaid.

“I thought this crazy movement was basically over,” Gregory said, looking helplessly at Belinas.

“Well, it is in America,” spoke up a general. “There are only a handful of renegade scientists left doing anything directly with it.”

“But they *want* to—they *all* want to continue their evil indefinitely,” said Belinas, angrily. “Can you tell us what exactly is being built, Admiral? I can see the satellite photos and what was released to the media, but it’s hard to make out exactly what’s going on. And for what purpose especially?”

The admiral stood up and walked towards a satellite image screened across a 150-inch monitor on the wall. The picture showed three skyscrapers under construction, rising out of the sea. He pointed to them with a rod, explaining, “We think Mr. Knights is building a brand new city, one that floats and can navigate across oceans. It’s where he and other transhumanists plan to conduct the science they need to overcome human mortality and other transhuman goals. There are no laws once you’re 200 miles out to sea, according to the U.N. Convention Act of 1984. Apparently, he’s got someone to foot the bill.”

“But that takes a lot of money,” Gregory insisted again, his pink silk tie crooked.

The others glanced at him disdainfully, not caring to point out the obvious.

The admiral continued, touching the screen on the wall to make the next image appear. The photo showed a massive electrical plant with a grid of thick wires that disappeared into the platform. The following picture showed 125 wind-powered generators near an Olympic-sized swimming pool. Another showed a grain silo on the northeast corner adjacent to a cement factory and a solar farm. The next showed the city’s airport with six commercial jets and eight helicopters lined up on the tarmac. Another showed the inner part of the platform, where sewer systems, walkways, and a subway tube careened around the city. Others showed the half-completed sports stadium where dozens of bulldozers, forklifts, excavators, and cement trucks were parked. One highly zoomed-in photo showed hundreds of tents encircling the docking port on the city’s north side. Thousands of tiny dots—presumably people—were working nearby. The workers’ electric vehicles, which looked like giant bicycle helmets, appeared to be zipping around the platform.

The admiral went through all the satellite photos—fifty in total—highlighting countless angles of the construction. When he was done speaking, Belinas stood up and placed his clenched fists on the table in front of him.

“Ladies and gentleman, that city—the so-called transhuman nation—is a menace. It threatens us. We need to stop Jethro Knights and his kind. Our spies say he’s even recruiting our very own scientists to work there—our own American citizens. He’s *stealing* them.”

The room went silent for many seconds until one of the generals answered. “Now with all due respect, Reverend, it’s hard to see how a bunch of nerdy scientists are going to threaten America. We practically forced them out. It’s their right to do what they want outside of our legal jurisdiction. And the rumor is they’re leaving because the pay is so good. Hell, when did scientists start making as much money as professional football players? I hear it’s almost four times what the best of us make.”

One of the senators hooted, and said, “Yeah, exactly. I hear they have a million dollar sign-on bonus. A million bucks—cash. In *this* economic environment. Can you imagine that?”

“It’s the humanitarian angle with which I’m concerned, people,” Belinas said, interrupting them. “Can’t you see that? It’s not the damn scientists I care about. It’s the grotesque experiments and modifications they plan on doing to the human body, which are fundamentally against our way of life and downright evil. This isn’t about threatening us with a gun, like you’re used to in a war. This is a corrosive gas coming out of the earth when you’re sleeping at night. That’s what the transhumanists are planning, whether they’re in our legal jurisdiction or not.”

“Well, what do you suggest, Belinas?” asked the other general. “We can’t just attack a group of scientists for doing experiments that technically aren’t illegal outside of our country. And if the rumors are right, these are people who are taking oaths to an autonomous nation with its own laws. There’s nothing saying you can’t do that. We’ve always encouraged freedom and allowed that type of civil liberty.”

“This tyrant, Jethro Knights, knows exactly what he’s doing. He created his own sovereign kingdom so his evil can go unmonitored and unheeded!” Belinas exclaimed.

The preacher knew he was throwing darts into the dark. The information about Transhumania was still too new and bizarre for anyone but himself to already consider acting on it. “Besides,” he continued, “isn’t it treason for our scientists to change teams? Can’t you see that damn city is going to be a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah? Something must be done.”

Gregory interjected loudly, “How the hell do you just start a country? That’s absurd. Aren’t there laws against that?”

No one paid any attention to him.

Belinas looked at the admiral and the generals, saying: “What I’m trying to get across to you all is that the President is expecting a report from us. I understand it’s not prudent for us to do anything immediately; however, this is an urgent new security threat. And the media is saying perhaps we didn’t win the War on Transhumanism; that maybe we just fanned the fire, wasted the public’s money, and scared scientists away in some brain-drain from our nation. We need to prove to the public we *did* win and will continue winning. I want some ideas from you all in the next weeks on how this rogue city-state can be handled. How it can be contained. How it can be eliminated.”

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Transhumania’s press conference opened in a prestigious hotel’s banquet hall in Cape Town, South Africa. The room was packed with media from all over the world. Janice Mantikas prepped reporters, making it very clear that Jethro Knights would not take any questions either before or after his speech. She even mentioned, quite casually, she wasn’t sure if Jethro would ever take questions or do interviews again. Members of the media didn’t know how to interpret her statements. Everyone was anxious and edgy, waiting for him to speak. Many journalists had traveled a long way to get the extraordinary story.

The press only needed one glance at Jethro standing at the speaker’s podium to realize they were

not dealing with the same man they remembered. He did not welcome the media like he once did in America. He did not make eye contact, smile, or personally greet some of them like he had in the past. He did not care to be engaging or diplomatic anymore. He bore a defiant, determined look on his face; not one of a young man who hoped to change the world, but one of an unyielding leader, bearing enormous resources and power, dedicated only to his mission. He looked like a man who was moments away from letting the world understand just how little he needed or cared about them.

“Ladies and gentlemen, behind me on the screen is a picture of Transhumania, the seasteading transhuman nation where scientists, technologists, and futurists carry out research they believe is their moral right and in the best interest of themselves. We are on our way towards attaining unending sentience and the most advanced forms of ourselves that we can reach, which is the essence of the transhuman mission. Of course, you’ve already figured that out—so let me just get to the point.

“In this room here today, and all around the world, many people are asking similar questions: Are Jethro Knights and other Transhumanians traitors to their home countries? Are they betraying the human race and its sense of a shared, universal humanity? Are they renegade atheists and blasphemers of a higher power such as an omnipotent God?”

Jethro stood taller and scanned the room. His face bore the unsentimental expression of an executioner at work.

“Here is the answer—and know that I speak for every person who has been, and will become, a citizen of Transhumania. The answer is: We don’t give a damn.

“People of the world, do not mistake us any longer as citizens of your countries, or as participants in your societies, or as people who would consider your gods, religions, histories, and cultures as something important. We are not those things. Nor are we willing to accept others’ ideas of power and control over us anymore. Nor do we give a damn about your opinions, your social idiosyncrasies, your glam media, your hypocritical laws, your failing economies, or your lives—unless you can offer us something in return to make us give a damn.

“In the past, we may have appeared to belong to your conformist concept of the human race; we may have looked like you, dressed like you, and even talked like you. We may have watched television shows like you, commuted in traffic to get to work like you, paid our taxes like you. But should anything—and I mean *anything*—become not useful for us, then we will quit that thing. We will quit the world—quit our allegiance to its powers, quit our sense of value to it, and quit our respect for its people. For all who know me and my colleagues who will be moving to Transhumania—we did quit.

“A planet’s nations and its people whom we live amongst are beholden to us. And not *us to it*. On Transhumania, we are all one-person universes, one-person existences, one-person cultures. Bearing that in mind, we may still live or die for one another: for our families, for our children, for our spouses, for our friends, for our colleagues at Transhumania—or for those whom we respect and for whom we care to reasonably live or die. We will not live or die for someone we don’t know, however. Or for someone we don’t respect. Or for someone or something we don’t value. We will not throw away years of our lives for uneducated consumers, for welfare-collecting non-producers, for fool religious fanatics, or for corrupt politicians who know law but don’t stand by it or practice it.

“Some of you out there have the insolence and the idiocy to call us traitors to our birth countries, or lost souls of an invincible God, or betrayers of civil society. Your fool mantra is: Don’t ask what your society, planet, or God can do for you—but ask what *you* can do for your society, planet, or God. What nonsense to a teleological egocentric functionalist, to a transhumanist whose goal is to live forever, and needs to acquire power to establish and protect that superlative goal.

“Your preachers, politicians, educators, and cohorts have lied to you for so long, from the day of your birth onward. They have conditioned you to obey and follow the status quo of your long-standing societies and its mores, tricking you into believing that by remaining one of them you are following the best, most righteous path. But it is not the best, most righteous path—it’s an ignorant fool’s path. It’s one that leads to death, and also one that leads to overall mediocrity and a personal state of reduced

power. I implore each of you to leave that fraudulent path behind, to revolt against it, to think totally for yourself, to strive for your individual power, to embrace transhumanism and our inevitable evolution as a transcendent species.

“But if you are not with us, and if you choose to be against us, then you are of no positive value to us. You are a blatant hindrance. We won’t care to protect you, or to respect you, or to share our genius, science, and power with you. Or even to pretend anything for you. We will have no system of honor to offer you, no system of fair play to present to you, no system of moral pity with which to save you. We will see you as zero value, if that even. And we are not afraid to understand that exact thing, to say it out loud to your faces, to live confidently knowing it. And more importantly, we are not afraid to act upon it.

“We are transhumanists who are all searching for the greatest power ever imagined, the greatest power we can attain in ourselves, the might of the omnipotender. Transhumania is our new home. We will continue to build and expand this budding sovereign nation with our own hands, using the passion of our spirit, led by the rationality of our minds. We will form a magnificent stronghold you cannot tear down. And if you try to stop us, we will fight you—and we will defeat you. We will kill you if we have to. If needed, we will kill every one of you, down to the last enemy of transhumanism on this planet. We will eliminate you into the void of the universe with no remorse, with the same cold morality a machine would use. We are through playing by your rules and on your terms.

“However, for those who are our allies—who think like us, who act like us, and who are useful to us—we will invite you to join us: as friends, as colleagues, as comrades. And we will trade value to each other to gain what we want. We will discriminate against and judge each other on the basis of whether we offer sufficient utility to one another or not. There’s only one quintessential rule on Transhumania: If you don’t add value to the transhuman mission, if you are inconsequential or a negative sum to our success, then you will be forced off and away from our nation. The people on Transhumania are only beholden to that. We offer exile as the greatest punishment known to humankind. Because what you are exiled from—the eventual possibility of your immortality and a chance at your omnipotent self—no ego, no money, no birthright, no political office, no force on Earth or in the universe can grant you. If you fail us—if you fail the transhuman mission—then you fail the very best in yourself.

“Ladies and gentleman, welcome to Transhumania. Welcome to the Transhuman Revolution.”

## PART IV

### Chapter 26

Jethro Knights’ speech was translated into a dozen languages and played around the world by the media. People everywhere were outraged. It defied all expectations. It was hailed as the speech of a monster, a crazed tyrant, a powermonger, a demonically insane person, a vicious rogue criminal. A10 leaders condemned it as ludicrous. Middle East terrorist groups put a three-million-dollar fatwa on Jethro’s head. Across America, many believed it was the Word of the Antichrist.

A far smaller group of people felt differently. After so many years of being professionally stifled, intellectually muted, and socially ostracized, many transhuman entrepreneurs and scientists of the world cheered. While the speech was worded stronger than they themselves would have delivered, they respected Jethro Knights’ unwillingness to compromise the transhuman mission. They valued his promotion of the determined and accomplished individual. They applauded his hero’s journey to reverse the falling fortunes of the immortality quest. They especially appreciated the face-slapping of religion, human mediocrity, and overbearing government. Modern society was at a tipping point of

such cowardly self-delusion and democratic self-sacrifice that someone needed to stand up and fight for what everyone wanted and admitted secretly to themselves: *I want to reach a place of true power and security that can't be snatched from me at the world's whim.*

Frederick Vilimich also saw the speech and recorded it. He watched it five times in a row at his London mansion. The glow on his face was etched into his skin.

He sent Jethro a one-line text—his first communication to him in weeks:

*Thanks for punching the world for me. V*

Jethro texted back:

*Thanks for giving me muscles to do so. J*

Every day over the next few months, Jethro continued meeting with top scientists and technologists around the world. In addition to receiving exceptional wages, each of the researchers who joined Transhumania was given a tax-free million dollar signing bonus. It was more money than many had accumulated in decades of work. If they brought approved colleagues from their fields with them, an additional hundred thousand dollars was given. The main obligations of those who joined the transhuman nation included staying their full five-year term and reaching reasonable performance goals in their work.

To give scientists a sense of belonging, real estate ownership was created in the tallest skyscraper. One-, two-, three-, and four-bedroom residences were sold at enticing prices. Jethro made it cheaper to own than to rent, and most people opted to buy upon arriving. It replenished the cash Transhumania needed for actual research and city operations.

Jethro ran the entire nation as if it were an aggressive, expanding technology company racing to bring an incredible invention to market. Every scientist had stock in its success, in the urgency of its mission. The result was a hiring domino effect. Soon, hundreds of scientists were showing up weekly to make tours of Transhumania and to sign contracts.

A tenured Washington State microbiologist with a decorated history of interpreting the telomerase enzyme—responsible for aging—flew into Transhumania for the weekend. He told his staff and colleagues he was getting flown there on a private jet and being put up in a complimentary oceanfront hotel suite.

“A free trip just to check it out—who wouldn’t go?” He said, half curious but also half skeptical about the supposed city of transhuman science.

When he returned to his university on Monday, he was no longer the jovial, cynical scientist. He immediately began approaching his best colleagues.

“I’d like you to come with me, Robert,” he said to his research partner. “Bring your whole family. There’s plenty of room.”

“Is the money really that good?”

“Forget the money. The laboratory facilities are like nothing on this continent. And everyone’s so goddamn smart and interesting. Remember John Callahan? And Michelle Friedenberg from Berlin? They’re all there already. Even Leonard Francis is moving there next month, they say.”

“So you’re really going through with it, Jeff?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it. We can do research ten times faster with the equipment they have. This is our chance of receiving the Nobel Prize.”

Another scientist, Yuri Bennovin, head of the Finnish Government’s artificial intelligence unit—specializing in creating consciousness in computers—was invited and flown to Transhumania. He texted his wife a day after arriving:

*Please list our house and car for sale. We are going on the adventure of a lifetime.*

*Yours, Yuri*

The chairperson of Tokyo's oldest university philosophy department—a professor specializing in biomedical ethics—was also flown into Transhumania for three days.

When she returned to Japan, she seemed out of place, out of rhythm.

"What's wrong with you, Fujian?" asked her husband, an aerospace engineer. "You've been acting like a ghost."

"I feel like I've been living in a vacuum for thirty years. Like I let the world tell me what to do. What to wear. What to think. What brand and color of lipstick to buy. I can't believe how amiss I've been. For years, I've written about this stuff but never really lived it. Transhumania reminded me how to be honest again, how to be authentic. The revelation of those lost years is hard to bear, Moko."

She left two weeks later—her husband in tow—to live, teach, and write on Transhumania.

Every day, Jethro's jets brought in an ever larger number of scientists from all over the world. Each visitor's initial sense was disbelief; they looked out the airplane's window at an iridescent floating city, shooting out of the shifting blue ocean far below. Upon arrival to Transhumania, pilots were instructed to fly circles around the city a few times to give onlookers a good aerial view. For many, such a bountiful and mysterious place seemed too surreal to actually exist, to just land on and walk around. It was like a new Wonder of the World, something imagined only in dreams. Then, there were friends and colleagues from all over the planet in one place, with one mission. All in the same state of mind. Many scientists commented they felt like graduate students again—when the world was something miraculous to believe in, when anything was still possible, when the next great discovery or the next great technological leap was perhaps just months away.

The logistics of running Transhumania were incredible. Rachael Burton went from chief architect to mayor of the city, advising staff on how to manage millions of details. Preston Langmore was in charge of leading and organizing the direction of the science and research. Jethro hired Francisco Dante to start a fifty-person news service in the city, complete with its own 24-hour television channel. Citizens basked in luxury and were treated like rock stars. Many joined fitness programs, learned new languages in night classes, and wandered around the numerous multimillion-volume libraries spread throughout the city. Citizens formed orchestras, chess teams, and culinary clubs. Fishing trips, rounds of golf, and jungle hikes on nearby tropical islands were arranged on weekends. Transhumania's boats and helicopters ferried scientists to and from their destinations.

Problems occurred, but they were quickly worked out for the most part. These were not people who complained about a broken hot shower or a bad Internet connection. These were professionals of the highest order, and they were all building the nation together. They fixed things themselves, went out of their way to improve operations, and helped one another when they could. These citizens were people of action, of doing—and doing it right.

At night, many of them looked at the stars from the windows of their skyscrapers and felt as if they had arrived on a remarkable new planet. They were never happier or more productive, or bound with a greater sense of drive.

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Six months after Jethro Knights' Transhumania press conference, Reverend Belinas and Senator Gregory Michaelson met with the President of the United States in the Oval Office of the White House.

"Sir, I really believe you need to speak to the Chinese President next week when he visits—about

Transhumania,” said Belinas.

“What for? There’s not any immediate threat. We only need to monitor the situation. They’re just a bunch of floating sci-fi kooks.”

Belinas was perturbed. A cigarette burned in his mouth, and he slumped in a leather chair next to the President’s desk. The reverend silently swore to himself. Two hours before, he received news that his congregation of believers had decreased for the third year in a row. His funds and resources had diminished too. The rumor was that his popularity had peaked. The core issue was more likely tied to the economy, which was shattered from coast to coast. Even his celebrity and heir supporters were closing their wallets. In the past twelve months, many banks had permanently shut their doors. Insurance companies around America evaporated. Manufacturing plants were empty and listless. Commercial real estate projects going up anywhere in the country were almost entirely commissioned by the government. Times were not just difficult, they were desperate.

“Have you heard much from anyone, Sir—about Transhumania? Military might? Anything?” asked Gregory, leaning casually against a bookcase in a corner of the room. He held a half-finished glass of Scotch.

“Sure, I hear stuff all the damn time. It seems people can’t talk enough about it, whether its voters, the press, or other politicians. The French President asked me about it at lunch the other day. He said, ‘What if they develop a nuclear bomb?’”

Belinas and Gregory carefully watched the President for an answer.

“Hell, I don’t know. We can’t make a ruckus or cause an embargo just because of something we don’t know for sure. Freezing the city’s assets is impossible anyway; the CIA Director told me we can’t trace any of their bank accounts. Frankly, our people don’t think they’re working on any nuclear bomb technology. The satellite images don’t show any enrichment going on.”

“Why not?” Belinas asked. “Jethro Knights is a militant man. Surely he wants that type of power and would use it if he had it.”

“Quite possibly because you made him that way, Belinas,” the President shot back sharply. It was the first time he had revealed he was suspicious about whether the NFSAs had really accomplished its goals.

Belinas turned pale and quickly sat upright. The President’s jab of frustration hit strongly.

In the corner, Gregory also stood up straighter.

The President frowned, not meaning to scare or badger his longtime minister. He was still very much on the reverend’s side, and added, “Look, Belinas, the generals just don’t think the transhumanists have the resources or time for that. It’s not a strong use of their time or part of their agenda.”

The President took a sip of his water, then said firmly, “Gentleman, we are old friends here, and men bound together in faith. I want to protect America and the world just as much as you do. But we are losing our shirts right now because of the economy. Damn crisis just a few years ago was a prolonged recession. Now people are starting to wonder if it’s a full-blown depression. My priorities are elsewhere. America is too poor and frustrated for another war against some far-out, far-off cause.”

There was a long, awkward silence. It filled the room as the President looked at his wristwatch. He sighed, then said, “And now, friends, I have to meet Senator Charleston about a fourth extension of the unemployment bill. More pork to deliver. I feel like a damn pizza man these days.”

Belinas shot Gregory a foul glance, encouraging him to press the President further.

“What about the scientists and engineers?” Gregory asked.

“What about them?”

“They’re disappearing by the thousands.”

“What can we do? Tell them no, you can’t go? Pay them more? Christ, they’re transhuman rogues anyway. If they don’t want to be here, then they don’t really belong here. Besides, there are others stepping up who do, replacing the old.”

“Some of those leaving are the best we have. Shouldn’t we keep them here? Insist they stay?”

“Gregory, how shall we do that? Shall we have a ‘War on Scientists Leaving’ as well?”

The President got up from his chair and walked to the window. He was full of raw nerves these days and he knew it. He looked out over the White House lawn and saw his Golden Cocker Spaniel taking a shit. Eight feet away a Secret Service officer was holding a small shovel to scoop it up. The politician smiled stupidly.

“I don’t want them to go,” the President said softly, “but to make it illegal for them to leave is not only beyond unconstitutional, it’s tyranny. I agreed with your War on Transhumanism. I’m a God-fearing man, and I want the human species to remain what it is. But to go further than that—to make it illegal to think what you want, where you go, and what you study—when there’s no tangible proof it’s hurting others, then that is too far. We must hold to our own values with our cherished beliefs and our unified sense of what is morally right. We must teach them our rules by example, not by guns or force.”

Belinas disagreed. He *emphatically* disagreed. He wanted an iron fist. Using guns and force was *exactly* how the transhumanists needed to be handled and taught. Belinas stared at the portrait of President Andrew Jackson on a nearby wall, knowing soon he would bypass the President’s authority if necessary, and go straight to Congress. Or better yet, straight to the generals.

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Jethro Knights stood atop Memorial Vista, gazing pensively at Transhumania below him. He was exhausted from endless travels and meetings. It was good to be here, he thought, good to be home. Near him, the commemorative statue of Dr. Nathan Cohen now stood. A sculptor from Taiwan, a longtime advocate of transhumanism, was chosen for the commission. Jethro had offered him excellent compensation to make the statue, but the artist refused to charge anything, balking at Jethro.

“Did you pay yourself for building Transhumania, Mr. Knights? Do you have a salary? Or a personal savings account? Or how about a retirement portfolio? No, of course not. Those things are superfluous for you. Because this isn’t your job, it’s your life. Please don’t insult me with what is going to be the paramount assignment of my life.”

The effect the artist created in the statue of Nathan Cohen was haunting. The shimmering, life-sized bronze body—headless and tortured—was being dragged away by black-stained, ghostly hooded men. Five feet away, cemented into the ground, was a sculpted skull; the expression on its face was adamant, enduring, unyielding.

Jethro also wanted the artist to create a statue of Zoe Bach; however, Jethro chose to postpone it indefinitely. It still hurt too much. The visceral reminder on Memorial Vista would be crushing. He pushed his mind away from thinking of Zoe tonight. Instead, Jethro concentrated on the sunset. It was magnificent, fading amongst a kaleidoscope of colors etched in the drifting clouds. He turned from the statue, and his eyes wandered to the benches lining the city’s edge.

In view, there was only one skyscraper remaining with substantial work to be finished: the shortest, called the Technology Tower. Its skeleton, almost 70 percent covered in siding, was fifty-two stories high. Soaring above it were two other highrises: The middle building was sixty-six stories, called the Science Tower; the last and tallest building, eighty stories in height, was named the Transhumania Tower. Each of the towers—bearing slightly varying hues of silver, green, and blue glass siding, configured to emulate circuitry design—shot towards the sky, harmoniously complementing one another.

Already complete, the Transhumania Tower contained many of the citizens’ homes near the top, including Jethro’s minimalistic but intriguing three-room residence. His customized dwelling was informally dubbed the “Immortality Bridge” because most of the city’s essential command controls

were located inside it. Dozens of servers, computers, and monitors neatly packaged against his living room wall could maneuver and operate all of Transhumania. Friends, colleagues, and guests of the city loved to visit for coffee or tea and watch the thousands of blinking lights, flow diagrams, and fluctuating color graphs on the screens. Near the floor-to-ceiling window of his dining room, Jethro placed a twenty-person glass table overlooking the sea. It was his place to host important meetings and dinners.

Farther down in this skyscraper, on floors forty-seven and forty-six, were located the offices and broadcasting studios of the Transhumania News Network. Below that, on floors thirty-nine and thirty-eight, was the Lojban Center, where a team of international linguists specialized in improving and teaching Transhumanians a syntactically unambiguous human language. The phonetically spelled language based on predicate logic was called *Lojban*, and over time, Jethro planned to make it the official language of Transhumania. It was the most effective and straightforward language on the planet for both human-to-human and human-to-computer communication.

Below the Lojban Center, many of the city's best restaurants and shops occupied the middle and lower floors, including multilevel grocery, department, and hardware superstores. In the bottom section of the tower were numerous conference halls, an elaborate spa complex, and the five-star Transhumania Hotel for guests. A gymnastics arena, a basketball court, and an ice-skating rink were located at varying upper levels in the twenty-five story basement. Storage units, long-term car parking, and emergency cargo holds made up the bottom levels.

The Science Tower looked complete on the outside, but workers were still finishing the interior of the highest stories. That skyscraper was for biology, chemistry, physics, and the medical fields. Sections of the building were separated between the disciplines of biotechnology, cryonics, cellular regeneration, nanomedicine, cybernetics, life extension pharmacology, chemistry, cognitive science, cloning, gene therapy, neuroscience, organ farming, tissue engineering, bacterial transformations, viral containment, psychiatry, cancer research, and nuclear physics. A floor was even dedicated to the fledgling field of quantum mechanics and its relationship with the brain and consciousness. At the bottom of the building was a five-story medical center, including the trauma and surgery bay, which was the most advanced of its kind in the world. Research and medical care were already underway on many floors of the building.

The topmost outside skeleton of the Technology Tower was only ten days away from being completed. It was the most difficult building on Transhumania to finish because of the complicated technology and engineering involved. Over 500 electricians and technicians spent weeks installing a massive array of complex wiring, tens of thousands of servers, and dozens of remote Internet encryption firewire systems. It was the building dedicated to everything computer- and microchip-oriented: all software, hardware, and nanotechnology research.

In its tower, every floor was dedicated to different technical fields: supercomputers, supercomputer hacking, software design, hardware creation, nuclear accelerators, fusion machines, robotics, artificial intelligence, nanobot technology, Web design, virtual world creation, computer chip architecture and construction. The dozen floors near the top were dedicated to everything military: missile building, aerospace design, robotic weaponry, and drone construction.

While Jethro Knights was disinclined to talk directly with new citizens about military strategy, as leader of a young nation—one who was scarred from his personal experiences with America—he knew the ability to defend itself from invaders and wage a successful war was power.

To everyone who asked, Jethro said, "There are contingency plans and appropriate defenses, which very smart people are working on right now. Besides, the United Nation's international rules dictate that no one has jurisdiction over us; therefore, technically, no one is allowed to bother us."

Realistically, Jethro knew the world would eventually attempt to assail Transhumania—to try and steal its gifts, and attempt to stop its technological ascent. From the first moments he conceived of his nation, there were ambitious and unorthodox military plans in his mind. He refused to waste precious

time and resources building multitudes of bombs and armament; instead, he wanted to develop powerful technologies that would render the enemies' major weapons useless. Everything was digital, computerized, and GPS-oriented on today's battlefield. The victor possessed the smartest computer whizzes and the most powerful computers, not the fiercest soldiers or the most destructive explosives. What was the point of mighty bombs and missiles if they were unable to explode or reach their targets? Jethro asked himself. What he wanted on Transhumania was hackers, programmers, code-breakers, and cyber-warriors—the world's best. He could never compete against the resources of larger nations in terms of firepower. Leading brains, however, he could muster. Jethro spent hundreds of millions of dollars of his military budget creating customized supercomputers and hiring the best techies in the world to run them. He aimed to be able to swiftly hack into a rival's missile guidance systems and dismantle or reprogram their weaponry.

Of course, only so much can be done with computers. Jethro spent nearly half a billion dollars commissioning the Hyperscram Jet Aircraft Project: the creation of four megasonic airplanes. They were to be unlike anything the world had ever seen before. They would provide both defensive and offensive cover to the small nation, without having to be manned. Each aircraft would possess the capability to fire Transhumanian-designed Tetronic T-1 guidance rockets with bunker-buster technology.

Next, he hired a team of engineers to devise a comprehensive shield system of missiles that could defend the nation against incoming raids or attacks, regardless of how they came. This included target-sensitive tracking missiles that would intercept and destroy enemy rockets or bombs before they hit the city. Additionally, he commissioned a project to create underwater charge deflectors, which tricked enemy torpedoes to explode long before they reached Transhumania.

The final plan of Transhumania's military was the development of ten ultra-advanced robots. Each machine would be designed to always remain under strict control of its personal avatar: a human engineer sitting behind a computer in the Technology Tower. Some of these avatars were also champion gamers with years of competitive experience in professional video game tournaments.

While every robot would possess the ability to fire weapons and engage in combat, each would be created with markedly different utility. Weaponbot, laden with guns and missiles, would be made for search-and-destroy missions. Medibot, with nine intricate fingers on each hand, would be designed to perform delicate medical surgery. Firebot, conceived with heatproof components and powerful fire extinguishers built into its limbs, would be made to fight all types of fires. Bombbot, planned to be bulky and nearly indestructible, would be for bomb squad detail. Crashbot, with one arm bearing a circular saw and the other a jaws-of-life device, would be for crash recovery situations. Buildbot, created for building or fixing tasks, would be able to perform everything from aircraft construction to tiny computer chip repair. Strongbot would be made incredibly tough and agile, designed for lifting and handling awkward and heavy objects with sheer accuracy. Polibot, with various radars and sensors, would specialize in security, detective, and police work. Soldierbot would be the ultimate soldier, created for all types of warfare and fighting. The tenth and last robot planned was to be the smartest, carrying in its chest cavity multiple interlinked computer chips and servers that could compute a trillion calculations a second; named Intellibot, this robot would be a walking supercomputer.

Jethro's ambitious military projects would take years to reach fruition. He was adamant that a third of his ten-billion-dollar budget go towards military development for the protection and expansion of Transhumania.

“What for?” Preston Langmore asked him, dubious when he found out. “Spend it on the research, Jethro.”

“No way. I'm going to bring them to their knees, Preston—then dock this nation on the Hudson River in New York City and take over America. We have a limited amount of resources here on Transhumania, but *they* have everything we need.”

“Are you kidding me?” Langmore said, flabbergasted. “You want to take on the United States of

America?"

"No, Preston, not just the U.S.A. The world. That's what the Transhuman Revolution is about."

To oversee the completion of his militaristic goals, Jethro brought in Oliver Mbaye from the Paris office and made him executive director of Transhumania's defense operations. Together, they chose their commanders and military personnel with extreme care—only after getting to know them thoroughly via multiple interviews, careful background checks, and in-depth psychological tests.

It was an unwinnable challenge to keep the groundbreaking defense developments hidden from the rest of the city's citizens and the watching world. Too much money and too many high-profile people were interlaced into the projects. Inadvertent minor leaks of information and satellite photography gave hints to other nations that military prowess was being created on Transhumania. Rumors spread quickly that the technology was highly advanced. It made leaders of the A10 countries edgy and fearful.

## Chapter 27

Ironically, as final construction on Transhumania was completed, and the city entered its first full year of research operations, the NFSA was reduced in size again. A second round of layoffs battered the American agency, which had recently been stripped of its budget by nearly half. And even that staggering multibillion-dollar amount left to run the agency was critically questioned by much of the public.

The heavy-handed downsizing wasn't much of a surprise to anyone. More and more over the past twelve months, the NFSA had found itself idle, relegated to basic bureaucratic and administrative tasks, like running the U.S. Drug Administration, overseeing the Federal Department of Agriculture, and implementing strategy within the NAH. Quite simply, its chief task was now totally over. It had undeniably won the battle against transhumanism in America. No scientist in the fifty states openly did research in the field anymore, and those who engaged in experimental science did so under strict guidance and observation from the government. Approved research included projects centered on creating better flu vaccines, drugs to lower blood pressure, better pain medication for cancer patients, bariatric surgeries for obese people, and easier methods for diabetics to imbibe insulin. They were aimed at improving common medical procedures and drugs to keep people alive, but never with perpetual longevity as an end goal, or with the mission to move beyond the fallible human body. The end goal, one NFSA spokesperson declared, was "a healthy, natural, and long life followed by a dignified death, with the spirit set to join its Creator."

As the NFSA shrank, many of its thousands of remaining employees turned to propaganda and educational activities. Scholarships were offered to students who dedicated research to preserving the dignity and cultural legacy of human beings. Documentaries and films, promoting the historical importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of citizens, were funded. National writing contests were sponsored on topics such as why the human species is more beautiful than a cyborg species. The NFSA gave college philosophy professors around the country grants to churn out books on why computer consciousness could never be authentic consciousness at all.

Senator Gregory Michaelson and Reverend Belinas, who remained the leading duo of the NFSA, recognized they were losing relevance. To counter this, both men launched into more anti-transhumanist actions and campaigns; however, the impact was muted. Gregory's mini education projects around the nation proved uninspiring and ineffective. In televised sermons and interviews, Belinas' increased negative rhetoric on transhumanism and technology was overkill.

Even though the American national psyche had turned its back on transhumanism, everyone realized the movement was alive and apparently thriving somewhere on the South Seas. Jethro Knights' new sovereign city was mentioned in international news almost every day, some of it featured in

sensational ways that garnered avid attention. Despite the NFSAs efforts to spew misinformation about Transhumania, the transhumanist enclave became known as the city of the future, where everything from robotic surgery to organic fusion cuisine to electric helicopters was years advanced. Press releases from the Transhumania News Network were often shared with the world's media:

*At First Annual Technology Olympics on Transhumania, Japanese Robots Suffer Stinging Defeat Against Robotic Ping-Pong Home Team*

*Transhumania Declares Nation 100% Fossil Fuel Free; City Now Completely Powered by Solar Energy, Swell Movement, and Wind Farms*

*Aging Telomerase Gene 458T Located in Humans for the First Time; Transhumanian Scientists Prepare Experiments to Adjust Its DNA Controls*

*Famed Eastern Fusion Chef Defects to Transhumania to Open Novel Restaurant; Blends Organic Asian Cuisine with European Dishes*

*Transhumanian Surgeon Performs First Robotic Open Heart Surgery in Airless Vacuum Chamber Room; Infection-Free Surgery Heralds New Direction in Medicine*

Increasingly, as the lack of innovative medical research and the socialization of healthcare in First World countries stunted the quality of medicine, wealthy people from around the globe began flying into Transhumania for exceptionally challenging surgeries. Many of the best hospitals' top doctors in A10 countries had long since relocated to be a part of the city's pioneering medical center. Transhumania's physician residency program quickly became the most prestigious on the planet. Its incredible faculty, resources, and state-of-the-art facilities were unlike any other hospital in the world.

Russell Blanche, the influential CEO of Empyrean Communications Group—the largest technology company in the world—made a highly publicized flight to Transhumania for prosthetic lung transplants, the first operation of its kind. Only two weeks before, doctors in America told the ailing 52-year-old executive he was terminally ill and that he probably wouldn't be alive in three months. Blanche had been diagnosed with a rare, genetic, degenerative lung disorder that was rapidly advancing. His mucus-filled lungs had already shrunk to half their size and bore the sick, tainted color of maize yellow.

One year later, at a major Las Vegas technology convention, when Blanche introduced his company's new flagship product—a communications handset with a holographic interface—he looked healthier than ever. In a press conference with great fanfare, he related the story of his medical experience in the transhuman nation. He told journalists his synthetic lungs were superior to the lungs of a marathon champion, and that the hundreds of non-functioning vessels in his chest had been replaced with far more durable synthetic ones.

“When I exercise now, my increased athleticism astounds me,” Blanche said. “For example, yesterday on my daily lap swim, I held my breath underwater for almost five minutes. Even before my health had deteriorated, my best time could not have been over two minutes. Additionally, while I was on Transhumania, they operated on my eyes, implanting tiny, permanent magnifying contacts into my retinas. My eyesight is now an unnatural 20/10—the equivalent of an eagle's.”

“But how do you *feel*?” asked a reporter with a squealing tone. “I mean *really* feel deep down inside—with all this fake stuff in you?”

Blanche laughed. “I feel great, and smart too. Last year I was a dying man inquiring into funeral arrangements. Now I'm here and thriving, ready to lead my company towards new phases of innovation and growth.”

The following day, Reverend Belinas read the cover story on Russell Blanche in the *USA Daily Tribune*. He clenched his fists angrily, and a thick vein across his scalp became strongly visible. More than ever, he wanted to destroy the transhumanists. A thriving transhuman nation supported his worst fears of what the future might be for the human race. Alone and without governmental support, however, there was little he could do. Currently, every politician was reluctant to tackle the situation when affairs were so economically dreadful at home.

“Attack Transhumania? Why, Reverend? More importantly, with what money?” he was asked by every elected official to whom he spoke.

A game-changer occurred three months later when a longtime friend and ally of the reverend, a hard-nosed three-star general, telephoned him with startling news. A prototype of some mysterious aircraft never seen before was photographed flying at incredible speeds near the seasteading nation. Large missiles were attached to the undersides of its wings.

“This looks stealth military to me,” the general told Belinas by phone. “It’s the fastest thing we’ve ever seen. And they now have three of the world’s five leading nuclear scientists on Transhumania—working together, for God’s sake. We should talk to the President and to Congress. Immediately. We could never defend against an aircraft of that speed if it were carrying nuclear weapons. With enough bombs, they could wipe out every major city in the world in a single day.”

The hairs on the back of the preacher’s neck shot up as he remembered Jethro Knights’ ominous press conference speech in South Africa.

“General, you are emphatically right!” Belinas exclaimed. “This is a most precarious situation. It’s exactly what I feared all along. Try to get as much intelligence as you can in the next seventy-two hours. Pictures, interviews, and any other evidence. I’ll arrange the rest. This time the President will listen—or we’ll bypass him.”

Six days later, over a private lunch at the White House with the U.S. President, Belinas tried securing the politician’s support. He warned the President that if he continued to remain neutral on Transhumania, and the rogue nation was to assert itself and do something radical, he would forever jeopardize his political stature, his legacy, his nation, and perhaps the planet. Belinas told him he was being downright foolhardy by not looking further into the urgent matter and asking for a congressional hearing, especially now that there was a distinct possibility Transhumania possessed nuclear weaponry.

“Mr. President, have you read what the CIA intercepted last week from Transhumania? Some of the ideas coming out of that devil’s hive are appalling. Their philosophers are writing volumes for the governing of a new world order. They want to put birth control in the water and limit child-rearing only to educated and prosperous families. They want to limit voting rights only to people who pay taxes, own property through self-acquired means, and don’t receive welfare. They want to implement a global mandate forcing everyone to receive a rigorous secular education that disses faith and religion. They want to create a law that ensures governmental control and leadership is always split evenly between males and females. They even want to limit the amount of lawyers in government, insisting a cross-section of society’s professions must represent the people.”

The President lifted his left eyebrow.

“They even advocate cryo-freezing mentally challenged and handicapped people, promising that they’ll be brought back in some distant future when their illnesses and deficiencies can somehow be miraculously cured. Do you understand? They suggest killing them. I’m certain they’re already committing such atrocities on Transhumania. This is crazy, evil, genocidal stuff. They have no respect or concern for the poor, the weak, the underprivileged, the destitute—for the common person.”

The President closed his eyes and rubbed his temples, fidgeting in his seat.

“Have you read their magnum opus of evil, the *Humanicide Formula*?” The reverend pulled out a notebook from his robe’s pocket and began reading:

*The optimum transhuman trajectory of civilization is that which creates the most efficient way*

*to produce omnipotenders. Currently, the best way to accomplish this is to achieve as expediently as possible the highest amount of productive transhuman life hours in the maximum amount of human beings; however, not all human beings will be a net-positive in producing omnipotenders. Any individual who ultimately hampers the optimum transhuman trajectory of civilization should be eliminated. The Humanicide Formula addresses this issue directly. It determines whether an individual should live or die based on an algorithm measuring transhuman productivity in terms of that individual's remaining life hours, their resource consumption in a finite system, and their past, present, and potential future contributions.*

Belinas threw his notebook down on the table in disgust and said, "It's horrifying. They don't give a damn about the human race and the egalitarian principles for which our civilization has fought so hard. They mean to exterminate us. Now they have the fastest planes in the sky—and the bomb. My dear friend, can't you see that America and the world are in grave danger and need your immediate proactive leadership?"

The President dropped his head into his hands. He was grateful when the preacher's fifteen-minute lecture ended. The politician had barely touched his lunch. Genocide-touting transhumanists who possessed nuclear missiles was just one more flashpoint on his hectic domestic and international agendas, and he didn't want to deal with it just then.

Yet, the facts were too much to ignore, so over the next few days the President decided to publicly side with Belinas' forewarnings. There was no doubt the planet was significantly less safe now that Transhumania was out there floating around, spouting revolutionary ideas, and inventing technologies the rest of civilization could only imagine.

A week later at a press conference, with Reverend Belinas and Senator Gregory Michaelson standing at his side, the President publicly questioned whether Transhumania posed a serious threat to the world, and if so, what might be done about it. Congress listened and formed an investigative committee to probe every angle of the issue, with a congressional hearing scheduled afterward to consider the results. The committee, led by Senator Michaelson, consisted largely of NFSA supporters. Inevitably, the committee gathered damning evidence against Transhumania.

Inside the Capitol building on the day of the hearing, Gregory made sure the looming transhumanist threat was heard and contemplated by everyone he encountered, including top members of Congress and the scores of press covering the event. Additionally, he armed his personal aides with pictures of the prototype Transhumanian aircraft and its missiles, instructing each of them to widely distribute the images. He also advised his top military engineers to walk around the Capitol's halls, loudly voicing to anyone who would listen that those aircraft were designed for one singular purpose: mass destruction via nuclear weapons deployment. In the halls and the backrooms, Belinas doubled his own warnings, pulling politicians aside for intimate one-on-one discussions, counsel, and prayer.

Despite the persuasive rhetoric and finger-waving admonitions, most politicians at the hearing looked worn out, reluctant, and detached. They each had enough worries in their home states without the Federal Government allocating more money for another war on the other side of the world. Senators and representatives smelled another witch hunt, but the energy seemed too low to pursue something so grandiose.

Still, Gregory, who chaired the hearing, worked hard to harness their attention and paint the matter as urgent and vital to the country's safety. He presented alarming facts and statistics, inviting generals and weapons experts to speculate on how and when Transhumania might pursue a nuclear attack. Gregory reiterated a handful of times that the leader of the transhuman nation was a self-appointed dictator, with an extensive history of radicalism and violence.

"Their leader, Jethro Knights," Gregory stated loudly, halfway through the hearing, "has openly welcomed the destruction of the Earth's human culture and the glorious civilization it has made. He is capable of any evil, just like the rogue military regimes in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East."

An aged senator from California responded by heckling, “Except its citizens are millionaires with two Ph.D.s apiece, not starving rice farmers, goatherds, or illiterate mercenaries.”

Muffled laughter was heard throughout the congressional hall. Gregory paid no attention. He was evermore convinced this tiny nation and its powerful technology were irrevocably dangerous. Belinas had forced and forged that conviction in him over years. Besides, for Gregory to think or act otherwise could be disastrous. He built his career, established his friendships, and saved his marriage on those concepts. His livelihood, his leadership, and even his ego, were dependent upon it now. There was no turning back for him, whether others agreed or not.

Fortunately for the young senator, it was a historically suitable time to persuasively strut his conviction to the government and the populace that military action was necessary. America was at an unprecedented low point, groveling in the mud, teetering on fiscal depression. Unemployment was at a staggering 17 percent. War during such times always proved reliable in reigniting economies and politicians' favors. It was a simple American reality: Making war was far easier than making jobs.

Near the end of the hearing, Reverend Belinas appeared in front of members of Congress as a guest orator and the nation's topmost spiritual authority on the dangers of transhumanism. A burst of flashes from journalists' cameras accompanied him as he stepped up to the podium. His charisma and eloquence helped sway many people closer to his side. His voice, loud and beautiful—his tall figure, in white and always provocative—added something far more profound to everyone's thoughts than just a nation with a strangled economy. He made people forget about jobs, politics, and the countless angry voters. He spoke to people's innermost fears and hopes, to their sense of right and wrong. To their sense of eternal damnation or a welcoming blissful afterlife.

He began his speech with exquisite precision by detailing the horrible experiments perpetuated in the transhuman city. He spoke of live human beings suffering in vats as their organs were harvested, screaming inside their minds in dire pain, but with no mouths to utter sounds. He spoke of people—half human, half machine—running and crawling about; of slaves and concubines stolen from Africa for each scientist; of experiments far more brutal than those of the Nazis.

Belinas continued, launching into the ramifications of a noble nation such as America turning a blind eye to transhuman evils and of the shameful, historical consequences that would surely follow. He spoke of Jethro Knights' airplanes being the Four Horsemen, part of the Bible's Book of Revelations unfolding right in front of everyone's eyes. He spoke of satanic robots policing the floating dictatorship, using shock Tasers and throwing agitators overboard to sharks; of Jethro fathering numerous children with his harem of partly synthetic women; of all the Transhumanians being issued Big Brotherlike, subcutaneous microchip tracking devices.

“They aim to put tracking chips into each one of us in the future too,” Belinas shouted.

He spoke of brainwashed scientists never being allowed to leave, chained to their laboratories, pushed to work endlessly day and night. He described new plagues being bred in their laboratories, to decimate the weakest in the human race as part of an overarching eugenics program. He warned of terrifying malevolence being perpetuated on every inch of the menacing floating city.

“This, my friends and colleagues, is biblical.”

Belinas always forced everything into a matter of good versus evil. It was his mastery over people, accomplished by not deciphering an issue but renaming it. Of simplifying it to a point of easily understood opposites, even if the opposites skewed truth and ended up as lies.

“I encourage each of you to look into your heart and ask if you can live in the world that Jethro Knights proposes—if you can live in a world where those atrocities are actually happening out there, just off our shores. You heard him say it: He would kill all of us if it were in his best interest to do so. Only the most evil monster could say that, only the most nefarious man could mean that.

“Jethro Knights,” he said, prophetically, “will become the Antichrist if we don't stop him. The man emulates a machine. He strives to think and reason just like a computer. He wants his dreams to manifest in programming code. He is a hater of humankind, of our beating hearts and the warm blood

flowing in our veins. I warn each of you now, when the Antichrist reaches his full form he will not be a human being. He will not be a beast with horns. He will not be mere flesh. He will be cold, metallic, and entirely artificial—composed of microchips, electrical impulses, and software. The Antichrist will be the first, fully self-aware machine—a totally synthetic intelligent consciousness. Anything that uses unbroken, infallible logic will, by its nature, attain pure evil. And that ghastly thing, that great wickedness, will instinctively and relentlessly strive to destroy the human race and all life in the universe until it is the sole remaining entity.

Belinas held out his clenched fists to the leaders of America, and said, “Soon a battle between us and them—humans and transhumanists—will ensue. And we must win that battle. We must stop them. I hope each of you will come to a firm decision, to speak to your friends, your colleagues, your ministers—and decide how we can defeat and dismantle this renegade nation whose ambition to dominate the world must end. As righteous-hearted God-fearing people, we would all prefer to avoid conflict and war, but our country and the rest of the world must engage in it for the sake of our future. For our children’s future. We must all unite, and together initiate our military strength against Transhumania. We must do it before they invent some demonic technology to stop us and strip us of our sovereignty and freedom. We must do it before they invent some hideous means to eliminate our democratic human way of life and our cherished religious faiths. We must do it before they irreparably damage the majesty of the human race.”

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Reverend Belinas knew the congressional hearing about Transhumania was just an important first step. To keep the newfound anti-transhumanism momentum building, he released to the media additional detailed pictures of the mysterious supersonic aircraft and its missiles. He also handpicked a group of faith-based scientists to write op-ed articles for major papers around the country, condemning Transhumania’s military aspirations. Finally, he called Amanda Michaelson, insisting she force her husband to persistently and repeatedly meet with the U.S. President and his Cabinet to push their findings and intentions.

Over the next month, Senator Gregory Michaelson was a frequent visitor at the White House. He also appeared numerous times on television, discussing transhumanist threats with all the major news channels and their lead anchors. He advised his experts at the NFSA to reiterate those same warnings across the country, by writing public reports and giving interviews to the media. Around the nation, a stark apprehension about Transhumania began to emerge.

“My best guess,” said a top-ranking NFSA officer to an IMN anchorwoman hosting a prime time news show, “is those superfast aircraft are armed with nuclear bombs, perhaps chemical weapons too. Which means right now, at this very moment, the world and its many large population centers may be in much more danger than we realize.”

From Transhumania, Jethro Knights watched the news in America unfold. His public relations director did the same, and reported to him that a U.S. Government-contrived smear campaign was underway, which usually predates some type of intervention or action.

Jethro replied, “Make no mistake—they will not leave us alone. America is on a slippery, downward slope bound for economic and moral dereliction. They need someone to pick on to make them feel better about themselves, some mission that makes them think they are powerful and righteous. But there is still plenty of time before anything occurs to disturb us way out here.”

“What will we do, Jethro, if they initiate real action such as military force?” asked the director. “Can they shut us down? Disband us? Destroy us?”

“Not to worry. We have plenty of fight to give them. Trust me—almost half our budget ended up

going to it," Jethro said, closing his eyes and sighing. He did not want to think of the exorbitant dollar amount that could've been spent on transhuman research.

That night, Jethro retired to his apartment in the sky. He opened a window and let the warm Pacific air flow in. The past five years had been nonstop, almost dizzying. He poured himself a glass of Transhumania's Pinot Noir, grown in the catacombs of the platform's basement, using hydro pods. He smiled at it, then looked over by his bed and stared at a lone picture of Zoe Bach. Nearly six years had passed since her death. He thought of their first trip to Napa Valley together, tasting wine and making love in a quaint bed and breakfast.

The Transhumanian wine would suit Zoe, he thought. Lots of tannins, a hint of berries, and a strong, definable nose. Also, that dark ruby color she always enjoyed. She would've especially loved the architecture of the city, he thought, looking out his window. The surgery center too. And the quantum mechanics lab and its bizarre metaphysical experiments. How fast and magnificent Transhumania had grown, and how different than she might've imagined. It made him sad and gloomy. He forced the thoughts of her away, as he had done for many years. If he wasn't careful and disciplined, he would think of her all day and night.

Many women approached Jethro Knights on Transhumania, all of whom were prodigious human beings with stacked resumes and innumerable qualities. Yet, he never let anything romantic occur. It made Zoe that much more intense in his memories. It made him that much more driven, loyal, and patient. It also reminded him of Frederick Vilimich. He closed his eyes in frustration, in curiosity, and tried to force himself to forget it.

"Not yet," Jethro said out loud to himself. "I can't think of that yet. It's still too far away."

But he relented, imagining for an instant—an astonishing instant—that he was frozen, dead, and searching. The first attempt to find her.

Seconds later, Jethro forced his willpower to reclaim his thoughts, and he pushed Zoe out of his mind. He looked to a distant spot on the sea and concentrated on the next imperative for Transhumania. How long before his military was fully functional and effective? And then, once it was, how far would he take it? He laughed at himself, knowing the answer already. He would go as far as he needed. He turned to his intercom and paged his secretary. Two floors below him in her residence, Janice Mantikas was sleeping on her couch, exhausted from a busy day.

"Oh. One moment, sir. I'm sorry, I just took a moment to rest on the couch, and I must've passed out."

"That's perfectly okay. Just make a note to have a meeting tomorrow at 10:30 A.M. for all top military personnel at the conference center. Now tuck yourself into bed and have a good night."

At the meeting, Jethro told his nation's defense staff what they already knew: one day, probably in a year or two, Transhumania would be faced with a full-scale military assault. And that the awakening of the American military machine was now occurring.

"When the time comes, we don't want just to repel with the shield systems what they throw at us, but also to begin a plan of striking back—a plan of conquering. The drones are being built for just that; however, we must be ready with our technology. I'm designating more of our budget for military. You will see the new adjustments tomorrow in your accounts. Use whatever you need to make us win. Efficient timelines and results are the only things I care about. Make sure your weekly and monthly updates reflect that."

After the meeting, Oliver Mbaye approached Jethro privately and said, "It's getting worse out there in the world. Much worse."

"Undoubtedly. The whole banking industry, what's left of it, can no longer pretend to be solvent anymore. So many people are upside down on everything they own, and getting loans to help is practically impossible. Plus inflation is rising fast. Governments are realizing they can't just keep printing money to save their institutions and countries. Their debts are insurmountable. Even the price of gold is finally tanking. It's very possible the dollar will have to be devalued in the next twelve to

twenty-four months.”

“I hear the same. The escalating recession is totally running amuck. Wages are still being cut everywhere. Wall Street has shed over half its jobs. Allied Motor Company needs another government loan to build cars, and they’re not going to get it this time. Pensions at the big oil and energy companies are lost for good, stolen by corrupt executives, or spent on their stupidly crude blowouts and oil tanker groundings. Social Security is literally insolvent. Municipal bonds are becoming worthless. Public schools and universities are cutting their academic years by a third just to have enough money to continue offering classes. Medicare is nearing bankruptcy and might be forced to dissolve. Internationally, there was rioting in Rio de Janeiro, Beijing, London, and Cairo last week. Not for any specific reason, just looting at the grocery and supply stores.”

“It’s good for us, Oliver.”

“I think so as well. It’s critical, though, that we time this just right. Letting them see and photograph the aircraft and missiles last month was perfect. They swallowed the bait whole.”

“Yeah, so predictable.”

“What about the new investors?” Oliver asked. “The Chilean commodity tycoon and the Ivory Coast real estate magnate?”

“They’re definitely on board. I’m just waiting for the wire transfers to arrive. Funding has jumped almost 50 percent again in the last quarter. Money is flooding in. People want whatever wealth they have left to actually do something. *Transhumania* is that something.”

“You’re converting them, Jethro. And making them believe we can win.”

“We *will* win.”

“What about that new team of computer scientists for me—with Josh Genear?”

“I’ve been told nine days. Their apartments are being readied.”

“Is Josh really the world’s greatest coder?”

“That’s what many experts say; however, hacking is his real specialty.”

“What does he look like?”

“Young, like a teenager. Red hair. Scrawny with spectacles. He has a few tattoos. He carries around an energy drink in his back pocket at all times.”

“This is just hearsay, but I’ve heard he was the one who hacked the Federal Reserve. And never got caught. A billion dollars or something crazy like that. Apparently, he did it right from his mother’s home in Los Angeles.”

Jethro laughed deeply. “Oliver, are you the last to know?”

“Know what?” The tall Frenchman stared at Jethro, genuinely surprised.

“Who do you think is holding that kind of money for him? It’s in the vaults below, and making a damn good interest rate for him too.”

“Huh? Really? No one tells me anything. My staff thinks I’m too straight.”

Jethro laughed. “That’s why you’re in charge, my friend.”

They walked toward a window and saw a supply freighter below them, 100 meters away, pulling into *Transhumania*’s docks.

“Oliver, I need you to make security as tight as possible. Now that things are getting intense we can expect terrorist attacks at any moment. I want every ship scanned for unauthorized personnel, dirty bombs, bio-agents, and anything else dangerous.”

“Of course. Our people and detection systems wouldn’t miss a thing. No ship or plane gets within fifty miles of here without being digitally laser-scanned from the satellites, then boarded and scoped by our machines.”

“Fine. Just keep on top of it. It’s one of our greatest vulnerabilities.”

“What about more people? Burton told me you’re looking into extension plans for the platform.”

“It’s true, more qualified people want to join than I can actually incorporate at the moment. So floating extensions are being considered for the best of them. Seems the whole world wants to come

aboard now.”

“Well, of course. So what are you going to do?”

“Honestly, we don’t need them right now. At least not here in the city. We already have the best. Our immortality research is progressing so quickly we’re going to be near the endgame in a decade. Death under most circumstances will cease to exist for Transhumanians. And those on the outside who can afford to will come here and buy near-perfect health. We just need to fend off the world until that time comes.”

“What about after ten years?”

“There are so many possibilities and angles, so much potential. But I don’t plan to still be floating Transhumania in another decade. I don’t think anyone does, as wonderful as that might be. I think the future holds going back into the world, bringing transhumanism and its gifts to the continents.”

“So you’re set on our timeline to try and take it all back.”

“Yes, Oliver, I’m fully committed. We should be ready for our war plans in twelve to twenty-four months at the latest. We need the world’s resources and many of its talented people as well. There are a lot of gifted transhumanists out there. Many of them just don’t know it yet. Once they do, however, they’ll significantly accelerate the speed and success of our long-term goals.”

“Fine. Then we’ll stick to the schedule and continue to let the world see our new weaponry and technologies. Surely, that will vex them enough to compel them to come knocking someday.”

“That’s the plan,” Jethro answered, looking off towards the sea, feeling America just over the horizon. In his head, the map of his life and ambitions was as vibrant and clear as ever.

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Five months later, Dr. Preston Langmore stood next to Jethro Knights’ dinner table, clutching a microphone. He was giving a speech at the fifth anniversary celebration of Transhumania. Listening to him were 10,000 other citizens who filled the sky hall on the top floor of the Science Tower. Surrounding them was a forty-foot-high glass atrium that panoramically overlooked the water. The horizon had engulfed the sun only three minutes before. Looking out, one felt like a ship in the sky, drifting amongst scattered clouds, a plethora of fading green, orange, and blue hues blanketing everything.

“And so, my fellow colleagues, the future is now upon us,” Langmore said, his words rolling slowly and precisely off his aged tongue. “The new cell-like substance that we’ve developed has so many applications. The manipulation of its DNA, controlled by our nanobots, will bring unprecedented changes to human life in the next decade, perhaps even in the next few years. We will begin our ascent to a truly immortal life form, full of all the benefits of what it means to be a transhuman being.”

Clapping ensued around him. He waited graciously and then continued.

“It is no coincidence that the first fruits of our work are now appearing in full form exactly five years after the launching of our beloved city. It gives me boundless pleasure to know that many of you are already improving your bodies by undergoing the necessary upgrades to achieve that which we always knew was possible: perfect health.”

Langmore continued his oration. A host of other leading Transhumanians, including Rachael Burton, had given speeches before him. Deliberately not on the schedule to speak that evening was Jethro Knights. Swamped with keeping the city running smoothly and efficiently, he chose instead to concentrate on greeting as many people as possible. He shook hands, discussed research angles, offered congratulations on breakthroughs, promised better budgets, dealt with grievances, and strove to calm fears that the outside world would soon destabilize Transhumania’s mission. His optimism and reassurances were strong pillars of confidence, vision, and inspiration to all.

When people were just finishing with dinner and beginning to mingle, Jethro decided to take a moment to make a toast. He grabbed his wine, stood up, and waited until the massive hall quieted down. Soon, all that could be heard were thousands of whispers. Langmore brought him the microphone.

“Friends, colleagues, and fellow citizens, the past five years have been a triumph for all of us. It has been a triumph for the human species and for whatever lies out there for us to become. Our sovereign transhuman nation has grown tremendously, mostly due to the courage each and every one of you has shown by coming here, by living here, by working here—by believing in what is possible on our dear planet and also in yourselves. You’ve set an example for the world of how to live and how to act, of how to fight for the challenge each of us faces. Your courage has brought in more funding that I ever would’ve dreamed possible. We are now nearly quadrupling the incredible generous donation of Mr. Vilimich, who originally bestowed upon us the resources to give birth to this nation.”

Jethro bowed respectfully to Frederick Vilimich, sitting to the right of him.

Thousands of people stood up and began clapping and cheering for the huge Russian man. A tiny, subtle smile appeared on the man’s hardened face, his thick brows covering his eyes like tentacles. He slightly nodded in appreciation. Jethro clapped for him too, noticing at the same time the almost imperceptible creases in the man’s shirt pocket. Inside it, as always, was the aged photo of Vilimich’s wife and son. It made Jethro think of Zoe Bach for an instant.

When it quieted down, Jethro continued naming other milestones Transhumania had reached, and discussed what could be expected in the future with so much new funding available to so many promising minds. He even commented on the fact that, remarkably, Transhumania was now at full occupancy, and a waiting list of amazing scientists eager to join was tens of thousands long. He spoke enthusiastically about the other transhumanist organizations around the world, and about some of its leaders who were in the crowd that night. He mentioned how they were creating powerful networks of transhumanists, including variations and offshoots of his beloved Transhuman Citizen. Even other seasteading transhuman cities and flotillas were reportedly being considered for construction. Jethro promised to work hand in hand with anyone embracing the transhuman mission, and praised the courage of people in far-off places.

Clapping ensued again.

“But I am not toasting them tonight,” Jethro interrupted the crowd, speaking over their noise. “I am toasting you. You, for making this special night possible. You, for renewing your contracts and continuing with your research. You, for supporting and standing by the transhuman mission. You, for allowing the omnipotenders in all of us to manifest and for participating in the Transhuman Revolution. May you all live as long as you wish. May you all find and fulfill your dreams. May we achieve what we set out to do.”

The crowd exploded into cheers. Some held their filled glasses high in salute; others made the transhumanist infinity sign with their hands above their heads.

“Enjoy your celebration,” Jethro shouted.

Moments later an army of waiters began moving tables and clearing a large open space in the sky hall. At a nearby stage, the world famous band, the Mellon Wings—flown in just for the party—jubilantly announced it was dancing time, and launched into their first song. A dance floor soon appeared near the musicians. A gambling area with a dozen card tables was quickly set up in the east corner of the hall. A giant chessboard using four-foot robots was set up in the west corner. An immense fifty-foot-wide television screen—complete with twenty helmet apparatuses capable of connecting all players at once to an experimental virtual world—was set up in the south corner. The screen’s image showed a tree-entangled Mayan temple in a teeming jungle full of howling monkeys, jaguars, and parrots. Waiters, including some who were droids, pushed through the crowd serving champagne, wine, beer, and Imagineade—the Transhumanian-brewed energy drink that induced creativity. The muse on the transhuman city was festive and celebratory.

Jethro Knights didn't stay long before disappearing into his residence to work. Preston Langmore, Rachael Burton, and Oliver Mbaye met near the blackjack tables and nervously looked at each other, knowing exactly why Jethro had left early. Yesterday, Transhumania's network of insiders in Washington, D.C. reported that a U.S. Congress-supported vote, to begin sanctioning and eventually policing the floating city, would soon be held.

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On the same day Transhumania celebrated its fifth anniversary, the media reported countless demonstrations and terrorist attacks around the world against transhumanists. The headquarters of a new life extension group in Budapest was torched. A CEO of a private cryonics center in Japan was found shot in the head, a Bible quote from the Book of Isaiah penned on his forehead. A Transhumania-bound package in transit at a postal distribution center in Philadelphia, billed as science equipment, exploded when prodded in a radar detection system.

Reverend Belinas was in the midst of a critical week. He worked closely with his squads of thugs, making sure each led noisy, disruptive campaigns during the anniversary time. He assigned his most talented agitators to work alongside other international anti-transhumanism outfits, instructing them to help those groups carry out hostilities against life extension and human enhancement scientists. He promised financial kickbacks and valuable press promotions to the leaders of those organizations if they succeeded in their violent activities.

“Don’t worry,” Belinas told a nervous director of World Light Network, an aggressive Christian group with ties all over Europe and Asia. “My friends at IMN and their crews will be there covering the stories you drum up. Just be sure to make news that casts the transhumanists negatively, and I’ll make sure extra special funding arrives for you next year.”

Over the past year, public views on Transhumania were increasingly becoming more divided. Many thought it worrisome and threatening that on a small floating community in the Pacific the world's best scientists carried out radical experiments unsupervised by any regulatory international bodies. Others cheered that amazing advances could come from such a unique, independent place. The media, often pressured by intimidation from the NFSA and high-level American politicians, mostly chose to depict Transhumania in a one-sided, negative light. Senator Gregory Michaelson continued to be ubiquitous on the news circuit, giving damning speeches on the renegade city and its dangers to American society. Belinas did the same in his broadcast sermons. Even the U.S. President took time in his State of the Union address to discuss the grim hazards the rogue nation might present to the human race.

Ultimately, many laypersons tuned out the warnings they heard, caring less and less for the doomsday naysayers anymore. Disastrous times had already arrived for large swaths of the world. Misfortune and adversity were everywhere. Having all the basics—food, employment, affordable fuel prices, safe schools, and healthcare—was more difficult than ever to come by, except for the wealthy. Besides, wasn’t it sensible to want some of the technology and advancements being developed in Transhumania, many asked. The cancer vaccine and treatments Transhumania had recently invented were especially contentious because pesticides, air pollution, and the breakdown of the ozone layer were producing a populace with significantly higher rates of cancer.

Yet, people couldn’t get access to the medicines. The American and other A10 governments had forced pressure on domestic companies to disallow affiliation with Transhumania, including all its products and innovations. Of course, when it came to healthcare, people just wanted the best, especially those who could afford it. You don’t tell a prosperous, hardworking mother and father their child is dying from leukemia when a cure exists 3,000 miles off the coast. That’s when the parents pledge

allegiance to transhumanism and arrange a private black market charter flight to Transhumania for a week of treatment. Medical care on the floating island was expensive for outsiders, but the incredible cures, advancements, and health results were easily worth it. Thousands of wealthy, powerful, and influential people from around the world began flying to Transhumania to assuage their health issues. By the time those outsiders departed the floating city, many were passionate believers in the *TEF Manifesto* and the transhuman mission. Back in their home countries, they compelled their friends and family to think the same.

For those who couldn't afford to get to Transhumania or to purchase its superior medical care, but were worthy to receive it, Jethro Knights created the Immortality Grant. It promised to treat, at no charge, 500 non-Transhumanians from around the world every month, if they were afflicted by life-threatening diseases or debilitating health situations. To qualify and be accepted, an applicant simply had to prove in a short essay why he or she was worthy to receive the free help, but couldn't afford it. The applicant did not need to be a believer or a supporter of transhumanism. For any person chosen, free transport, housing, food, and medicine were provided to cure their ailment, improve their health, and change their life.

Every month a different twelve-person team of Transhumanians, led by Jethro, sat around a giant conference table and scoured over tens of thousands of applicants. These people ranged from dying cancer patients to crippled car accident victims to children hounded by tragic birth defects. Everyone applied, from environmental activists in Paraguay, to rural school teachers in Mongolia, to children soldiers fighting dictatorships in Africa.

Almost overnight, the Immortality Grant became one of the most renowned awards in the world. Those who received the grant and returned healed from Transhumania said the experience was like a swim in the magical waters of the fabled Fountain of Youth. The media, large and small, widely covered some of the most extreme healing cases, often in sensational ways. Inevitably, an ever-increasing number of people applied for the grant every month. Soon, the number of applicants was in the millions. Most of those people were not worthy of the uniqueness of Transhumania's life-saving gifts.

"Here's a Las Vegas lady requesting the grant; she has five kids from three different marriages," announced a young biochemist. He was sitting at the conference table with Jethro Knights and ten other Transhumanians on that month's Immortality Grant team, scouring through endless applications. "She says she's unemployed, lives in a trailer park, is barely able to feed her family, and now has been diagnosed with brain cancer. She says she wants to live longer so she can teach her kids how to be responsible, upright people."

A computer engineer sitting next to Jethro grumbled loudly. "Isn't there a way to screen idiots like that from the applicant pool? What a waste of our time. Send her six feet of rope to hang herself."

"Negative," said Jethro. "The cost of the rope isn't worth it."

"Finally got a good one," a nuclear physicist blurted out. "This 22-year-old Cambodian kid started a small nonprofit group to put solar panels in isolated villages near the border of Laos, where there isn't any electrical power at all for a hundred miles. Unfortunately, both of his legs were blown off by a landmine while on the job last year, and now he can't physically do the work anymore. He's requesting new legs."

"Put him in the finalists pile," said Jethro. He sounds like the kind of person who would enjoy a few weeks here while we bolt on our newest bionics to get him back to work."

Despite the huge success and generous spirit of the Immortality Grant, the United States Congress voted for America to begin banning all association with Transhumania. It enacted laws that made the use and application of its inventions, medical cures, and technology illegal, treasonous, and punishable by prison time. Congress cited that Transhumania's unregulated weapons proliferation, dangerous untested medical cures, and violations of accepted world trade, tax, and technology agreements were all highly illegal.

To enforce its new sanctions and laws, the U.S. Government began carefully monitoring and inspecting all airports and ports where planes and ships to and from the floating city might arrive. More importantly, it instigated high-level conversations with other A10 countries, asking all members to apply the same political, legal, and economic pressure to Transhumania as the U.S. was doing. With the world economy shattered, A10 countries agreed, sensing a good chance to divert their attention to something that seemed righteous, humane, and praiseworthy. Soon, all members began issuing threatening rhetoric and applying sanctions against the seasteading nation if it refused to allow the United Nations to internally monitor its scientists' experiments and emerging technologies. Inevitably, a global united front was formed against Transhumania.

The international coordination lacked unity, however. Behind closed doors, finger-pointing and accusations were abundant. Leaders of the A10 suspected the President of the United States and Senator Gregory Michaelson—who was at the start of a campaign run for the White House—were after exclusively acquiring the new military and scientific technology on Transhumania. After all, America, once the longtime leader of the world, was no longer that at all. They may have still reported the largest GDP, but it wasn't by much of a lead anymore, and they certainly lacked new ideas and inventions in the pipeline. Data showed China, India, and maybe even Brazil would surpass them in less than a decade in terms of innovation and overall wealth. The U.S.A. needed something to kick-start them as the undisputed world leader again, as the principal superpower. One obvious way was by exclusively grabbing Transhumania's bounty of transformative technology, medical cures, and inventions.

“The bully stealing from the new kid,” was whispered and chuckled in the backrooms of the Chinese, Indian, and Brazilian governments.

Despite pressure from A10 sanctions, Transhumania remained mostly unaffected due to its assiduous commitment to remain independent of the world's nations and its economies. The floating city possessed enough on-board resources for many years, and the black market around the globe was more than sufficient to provide additional measures for the tiny country.

Reverend Belinas and Senator Michaelson knew this, and pushed the NFSA further—beyond the law. Way beyond it. They began meddling in the personal lives of Transhumanians who were former Americans, seizing their bank accounts, placing IRS liens on properties they owned, and harassing their U.S. family members who didn't live on the seasteading nation. When they signed on years ago, Jethro had forewarned Transhumanian citizens that these things would eventually happen. That precautions like changing names on titles of real estate and other assets would be imperative. That moving immediate family members with them onto the floating city was preferred. During the past five years, many scientists sold their properties and assets, putting their money into accounts held in Transhumania, or abroad under secret names and corporations that were untraceable.

Inevitably, some Transhumanians who were formerly Americans felt intense pressure and returned to their native cities, caving to the Stalin-like actions of the NFSA. Soon, other A10 countries saw the success of the overboard tactics and also implemented them to distract and sabotage their defecting scientists. Over the next few months, hundreds of Transhumania's citizens left, reluctantly returning to their homelands. The floating nation felt the pain of an open wound, oozing its own blood and energy. Science projects in the skyscrapers were left unfinished; offices and residences were left vacant. The mood was dour. One citizen in particular, Nobel Prize winner David Cantury, while working on brain neurons that interact with computer chips, announced his departure and went back to San Diego, California. Jethro Knights begged him to stay, but he refused.

“They're targeting my mother, Jethro. They're calling her in the middle of the night and giving her goddamn death threats. I don't want to leave Transhumania, or leave my research unfinished, but men wearing dark sunglasses are following her around the grocery store. They're leaving packages at her front door with human bones inside them.”

“Bring her here, David. We'll pay for everything. We'll have her here by tomorrow—in my personal jet, if you like.”

“I’ve already told you. She won’t come. She’s ninety-two years old and incredibly stubborn. She just wants to finish her life where she is, in the same house she’s been in for over a half century. I’m sorry, Jethro, but she’s my mother. I need to go protect her and be there for her.”

“They might kidnap you. Or torture you. Or charge you as a traitor when you’re back there. The American Government is liable to do anything.”

“I know that. But she’s my mother. Do you understand? My mother. I have to go and try to help her.”

Jethro understood. If it were Zoe Bach or his child doing the same silly thing, he would be in a conundrum. He told the scientist to come back when he could, and that he was always welcome. That same night, however, while on a walk through the park at Memorial Vista, Jethro came to a decision. Staring at the statue of Dr. Nathan Cohen’s decapitated body being dragged away by black-clad ghouls, it was more than Jethro could tolerate anymore from America and the A10. David Cantury was irreplaceable, and his research was essential. He was one of Jethro’s top ten visionaries. His laboratory was filled with 5,000 Petri dishes, and only he knew exactly what was going on with them. The goal of successfully integrating brain neurons with computer chips could now be years away.

Jethro phoned his secretary, instructing her to organize a secret meeting the next day between the military, science, and technology heads of Transhumania. The time had come to prepare for the war he always knew was inevitable.

## Chapter 28

Normally, Jethro Knights called division heads together on a quarterly basis, when speeches and computer presentations were made over a four-hour marathon lunch. This time, the impromptu meeting was called only five weeks after the last major gathering—and every supervisor knew what it meant.

“Ladies and gentleman, thank you for coming,” Jethro said from the podium, when all 235 Transhumanian section leaders filled the conference hall. Behind the seated crowd, the ocean howled on that stormy day, flexing the skyscraper’s thick windows.

“This is an arduous moment for me, and these are difficult words I must say to you today. They are going to be followed by many challenging weeks and months ahead of us. We are entering the most critical years of the transhuman movement since the NFSA shut it down in America. As you know, the outside world increasingly attempts to obstruct the trajectory of this nation. It’s the same old bullshit.”

People in the audience nodded in agreement.

“They have imposed economic sanctions on Transhumania and its citizens. They are harassing our friends and families in our former countries. And, eventually, they will pursue a full-scale military attack directly on our beloved city using whatever justification they can muster. We don’t know when they’ll do it. It could be in weeks, or in many months. Our sources say they clearly mean to halt our research and eliminate our way of life. I believe they’ll stop at nothing to do so. They aim to stick you all right back into your old worlds—to their poorly funded universities, insolvent banks, potholed roads, corrupt tax schemes, stagnating laws, and religiously biased cultures. They mean to befuddle you like they befuddled themselves.

“You at the lead here in Transhumania know that we are at the cusp of possessing the technology and strategy to defeat them. Our four-tier military system is just about ready. Our aircraft are in the final testing stages; speed records were broken again last week. The anti-missile defense shield is up and functional. The supercomputers are ready to dismantle missile navigation systems in seconds. Even our robots have just returned from their first set of training missions with outstanding success.

“My friends and colleagues, I believe the time has come to use our technology and our creations to complete the goal that was built into the *TEF Manifesto* from the start, which we all agreed to uphold

before coming here. The Transhuman Revolution seeks to transform the world into a transhumanist-inspired planet. Transhumania aims to fulfill that goal in order to harness the Earth's resources and to unite with those millions of people on the outside who can, and want to, help us accelerate the greater transhuman mission.

"I know many of you would prefer a world without war and violence. I wish I could tell you that kind of world was possible right now. I wish it was that easy," Jethro said, his voice tempered. "It is not possible, however. At least not now. Make no mistake, my friends and colleagues, this will be war. Death, destruction, and suffering are inevitable, and the world will not easily forget what we do."

"With those realities in mind, I have come before you today to give you a choice: If you are not unequivocally on our side, or if you are not ready to meet those challenges, or if you think you don't want to be involved, then I request that you terminate your employment and citizenship on Transhumania. You'll be given seven days of departure preparation and free transport off the city to wherever you desire to go. You can take the money you've earned thus far, but all research, all your science projects, and all your inventions of technology must stay. You agreed to that in your contracts before you were allowed to live and work here and be one of us."

"For those of you who choose to leave, understand that Transhumania and the *TEF Manifesto* are built upon the strictest integrity, seeking the best in ourselves and in our mutual transhuman aims. Cowards, deserters, and those who straddle moral fences while playing the field are not my idea of venerable transhumanists, or of worthy colleagues, partners, and friends. I encourage you to carefully weigh your decision of whether to leave or not. You will not be invited back—not to our amazing floating city, not to the new world we will forge in the future."

Jethro gazed into the crowd, wondering who would leave. He hoped only a few, at most. He needed every single one of them. And each of them needed each other.

"Every one of you is to go to your teams and staff today, and tell them the same thing I have told you: war is imminent. You are also to offer them the same opportunity to leave Transhumania on the same terms I have given you. Tell them everything exactly as I have told you just now. If there are those who are afraid, confused, or worried, tell them to come speak directly to me, or Dr. Langmore, or Mayor Burton, or Mr. Mbaye. Some of these distressed citizens may need just a little reassurance to make the right decision."

"For those who stay—all of you, I hope—a comprehensive war plan is being finalized, but it will likely not be implemented unless the outside world strikes first. We have that luxury. We will try to reason with the governments of the world. We will try to help them come to support our way of life, to join us and provide what they can. But once they refuse—and they likely will—and once they attack us militarily—and I'm sure they will try—I will order our defensive forces to retaliate with acute vengeance. Absolute victory is our foremost goal. We will not leave a major political building standing on any continent; we will not leave a major religious structure intact anywhere on the planet; we will not leave any governments operating freely and independently. The lesson we inflict will be severe and lasting; the power we demonstrate: undeniable. We will attempt to avoid casualties to the populace. Infrastructure will be left untouched wherever possible. Social mayhem and looting will try to be controlled. Economies and utilities will be ordered to operate. Law and order will attempt to be maintained as best as can be accomplished."

Jethro glanced out at the chaotic sea. His colleagues knew he did not look forward to going through with any of it. Jethro's inner desire was to work on his floating mass of creative energy with good friends and brilliant colleagues for decades to come—to embrace and celebrate the science, to write philosophical papers on the direction of life extension, and to directly pursue immortality. There was already enough technological advancement on Transhumania to guarantee every citizen a far greater extended life: 120 years plus, easy. And, who could foresee all the brilliance and innovation that would happen in those extra decades? Vast amounts, undoubtedly. There was no need to go out there at all.

Regrettably, the smug outside world wanted in, wanted control. They erroneously deemed it their moral right. And they would stop at nothing to push their siege on Transhumania, especially as the city grew stronger every day. But Jethro also deeply believed some of the world's population on the outside—possibly much of it—were valuable in and of themselves; they were significant, unrealized transhuman potential. Especially if some could be turned and recast: formed and guided away from being sheepish, religious, fad-chasing consumers into being independent thinkers and creators. Jethro Knights and every person in that conference center knew this was not just about transhumanism, but about successfully navigating the possibility of a Singularity—controlling artificial intelligence and merging with it once it launched. And not being destroyed by it, or left behind by it, or bedeviled by it. Humanity was at the very end of its brief existential epoch in time. For that transition, Jethro needed everything the planet possessed in its arsenal. Every resource. Every available transhuman mind. Every value possible.

Jethro turned from the ocean and stated firmly to the leaders of Transhumania, “We want to *teach* the people of the outside world, not *destroy* them; we want to *convince* them, not *dictate* them; we want them to *join* us, not *fight* us. They may not be essential, but they may help make it possible for us when it’s time to journey through what *is* essential.”

Jethro stood near the podium after his speech was over. His eyes were intent as he watched the grave faces of his colleagues. He lifted his arm, inviting any questions.

“If we win,” called out Dr. Brad Warner, head of the robotics division, “what will happen afterward? What will we do? Where will we go?”

Jethro sighed and slumped his shoulders. “For me this is the most difficult part of the future. Because I will ask something of you all...that nobody wants to do. Because we all love it here so much, sharing our dreams and research with the most interesting people in the world every day.”

Jethro took a deep breath, “I will ask you to leave Transhumania. In the next few weeks, each of you will be receiving a personalized pamphlet with details. In short, once we win, I will request that most of you return to your former homelands. Or wherever you best fit. You will have a choice, of course, to do as you desire and go where you like, and take the wealth you’ve earned. Nevertheless, in the best interest of the transhuman mission, I feel it expedient to appoint you as interim leaders of your birth nations and its major cities. Many of you will also oversee massive new science projects that only the resources of individual continents can foster. Others of you will be asked to found and build new universities and educational institutes, some of which will become the largest, most populated learning centers in the world.

“It is my hope that in your new appointments, you will seed and cultivate a surplus of amazing new transhuman projects to fruition for us all. As incentive to accept these new duties asked of you, your compensation packages will be staggering. I aim to make each and every one of you—as well as all other citizens on Transhumania—some of the richest and most powerful people in the world.”

Murmurs erupted in the crowd, until Dr. Mohamed Abrim, the Iranian Nobel Prize-winning chemist, stood up and asked, “What of our research and discoveries? What will happen to all our advancements and hard work here?”

“On your journey back to your homelands and new posts,” Jethro said, “you will take the inventions, technologies, discoveries, and new fields of science we’ve created here and share them. Share them all: the cures for cancers, the anti-aging innovations, the aerospace advancements, the biotech tissues, the neurotech enhancements, the microchip improvements, the robotic technologies; anything and everything that will kick-start their economies, spawn new commerce, and enhance our relations with the world’s people. You will be the visionaries and leaders who make our greater future possible. You will launch a new era, all under the Transhumanian flag.

“Earth, and human habitation of it, will be redesigned. It will no longer be many different countries with different cultures on different continents, but one committed transhuman alliance. It will be transformed into one global civilization bound to advancing science—one great transhuman planet.

There will be no more sovereign nations, only Transhumania. Our transhuman goals will be the same as before; there will just be a lot more people working towards them, and a lot more resources to help us achieve success.”

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Four months later, after sanctioning trade, freezing accounts, and issuing threats against Transhumania and its citizens proved largely ineffective, A10 governments decided to pursue far harsher action to control the rogue nation. At the urging of Senator Gregory Michaelson, Reverend Belinas, and the President of the United States, America recommended that all A10 countries convene in Europe to create and sign a bold new decree. In a highly publicized meeting in Brussels, the ten countries unanimously voted to issue a formal ultimatum—for the protection of humanity they insisted—to collectively monitor and regulate the activities and research on Transhumania. Moreover, they determined their collective legal right to stop transhuman experiments discovered to be crimes against the greater good of the human race. If Transhumania didn’t comply, then the A10, through a resolution with the United Nations, retained the right to declare war and use military force to accomplish their objectives.

The following day, the ultimatum was crafted into a letter and addressed to Jethro Knights and Transhumania. The letter was signed by all leaders of the A10. Numerous other countries around the world also issued their support and consent when requested by the A10. The letter was sent via Chinese Government courier to Transhumania.

Jethro was working at his desk in his residence, dictating to his computer, when the computerized intercom announced, “Dr. Preston Langmore is here to see you, Mr. Knights.”

“Okay, let him in,” snapped Jethro, annoyed to be interrupted.

Langmore quickly walked in, holding up the sealed letter in his hand.

“Well, here it is, Jethro,” he said, looking pale and nervous.

“Oh come on, Preston. We already know what it says. We don’t need to read it. It says: Dear Transhumanists: We’re afraid of you. We don’t like being afraid. We’re a super-ape race. We worship omnipotent gods and pink elephants flying around in the sky, which we can’t really see but can create very elaborately in our minds and cultures anyway. And why don’t you join us and be a super-ape too? Otherwise, if you don’t, we’ll beat you up.”

“Yes, probably something like that.”

“Open it. Pin it up somewhere. Maybe at one of the restaurants downstairs. Or better yet, sell it on the Internet to fund some research. It might bring in some drachma.”

“Jethro, this is serious,” Langmore insisted.

“Yes, I know it is, but be quiet now. I’m just finishing the final section of my essay, *The Morality of a Machine*. This is one of the last moments I’ll get to write in peace, possibly for years.”

Langmore opened the A10 letter and read the contents aloud. Jethro tensed up, staring at his computer screen, but not registering anything he saw. He was carefully listening to the semantics of the letter’s language, hoping there might be another way.

There was not.

“Well, there you go,” Langmore said after reading it.

“Yes, it’s inevitable now—war.”

“So, how will we proceed?”

“I’m going to go to America to offer my surrender terms.”

“Huh? What!?”

“Oliver, Burton, and you will be left in charge while I’m gone.”

“That’s absolutely insane. Are you serious?”

Jethro stood up, stretched, and walked towards a hot pot of coffee—a permanent fixture in his living room. He held it up and offered some to Langmore.

“No way. Not what my nerves need at this moment.”

Jethro poured himself a cup and took a large gulp. Meditatively, he looked at the sea through the apartment’s immense windows. He was tired, and all he really wanted to do was finish writing his latest paper and enjoy the last few moments of peace on Transhumania.

Langmore blurted out, “They could kidnap you, kill you—anything.”

“Yes, I imagine that’s the point,” Jethro said, his thoughts shifting to Zoe Bach for an instant. Then he even questioned the nature of death, what became of her, and how soon he could find out.

“Are you sure, Jethro?”

“Yes, I am. And I understand your concern, Preston. But if they do anything stupid, it will give us ample provocation to go to war and send out the four aircraft.”

“Do you need ample provocation?”

“No, of course not,” Jethro said quietly, full of diplomacy. “Nonetheless, we should try to be cognizant of the fact that everyone in the world—and I mean everyone—will be watching us. The course of history will be fundamentally transformed. We don’t want to be interpreted as implacable aggressors. That’s important to me. That’s important to the future of greater Transhumania and the new scientists who may join it. That much I can give them.”

“More human than I thought, now that missiles are being armed and pointed,” Langmore said.

“Far from it. Just posterity I’m thinking of, Preston. We’ll have seven continents with billions of people to manage. It’s going to be a lot more complicated than running a city full of well-mannered, over-educated scientists, all striving for the same goals.”

Three weeks later, an arrangement was made for Jethro Knights to meet with the A10 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City. Top leaders and diplomats of each country flew in for the assembly. It was assumed Jethro wanted to negotiate or offer his nation’s conditional surrender so that Transhumania might be able to continue its scientific missions. The A10 coalition, over days of teleconferencing and tense backroom meetings with each other, tentatively agreed to a negotiated surrender. Nevertheless, each wanted the technologies Transhumania had invented, specifically those that were military-related, and none could agree how that would be shared or distributed amongst each other.

Reverend Belinas knew something was awry with Jethro’s visit to New York City. He doubted Jethro would ever surrender, even conditionally. Regardless, he was adamant that only the United States broker a deal with Transhumania. And that if any deal were made, America would retain majority control of the floating city since Jethro Knights was, in theory, still a U.S. citizen. He convinced the U.S. President and Senator Michaelson to insist on the same, expounding how America could not afford to let Transhumania’s discoveries blossom in other nations.

By the time Jethro showed up in New York City, feuds over who ultimately would control and monitor Transhumania were raging between the most powerful A10 countries. Friendly relations and cooperation between the allied nations were severely compromised. They were all blind to the real reason Jethro was coming.

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Behind locked doors at the A10 assembly in the United Nation’s legendary Summit Chamber in New York City—a massive hall designed for the most urgent international occasions—Senator Gregory Michaelson stood at a podium reading the charges levied against Transhumania. The A10 had

designated him as the lead spokesperson of the meeting. The seated dignitaries of various countries formed a thirty-meter-long arch around the podium. Jethro Knights, wearing faded jeans and a gray, Transhumanian-made, bio-monitoring T-shirt, sat in the middle as if he were on trial. A small bronze plaque bearing the name “Transhumania” was in front of him atop his desk. The configuration of the assembly reminded him of the town hall forum at Victoria University years ago. Noticeably absent, though, were all media. The A10 wanted to keep negotiations, except for the final result, strictly out of the public eye.

Gregory delivered a long accusatory speech of many carefully crafted sentences, describing the dangerous ethical conflict between the human race and Transhumania's research. He spoke of the perils of too many veteran nuclear scientists working together in one isolated city; of medical researchers pushing the bounds of the human body and mind with no outside, authoritative regulation; of the need for civilization to be led by a higher power that protects us from our own greed, our own darkness, and our own imperfect selves.

Gregory made the additional point that if Transhumania's medical advancements, cures, and vaccines were to be openly shared with the world, then the tiny city might be allowed more normal provisions and a reasonable measure of independence. He continued, offering that Transhumania might even be welcomed back into the global community as a recognized sovereign state—of course, only after a lengthy period of strict adherence to universal human rights, rules of democracy, and custom-tailored U.N. dictates—which would include security monitoring of the nation. At the end of the Senator's speech, clapping ensued by the A10 politicians and their dignitaries.

Jethro Knights found their enthusiasm so ridiculous it was almost amusing. How do buffoons like these ever get into power, he wondered? When it was his turn to speak, he rose from his desk and confidently strode up to the podium. He passed Gregory in the aisle and neither greeted nor looked at him. Gregory eyed him disdainfully.

At the podium, Jethro introduced himself and proceeded to command his aggressors for allowing him the opportunity to speak. He especially emphasized his gratitude for being able to state his terms live to the world, because he wanted everyone in the Summit Chamber to know that his speech—through technology that only Transhumania could develop—was being transmitted across the planet's airwaves. Transhumania's satellite-filming technology recorded heat-sensing imagery and worked through all basic building materials, including concrete, wood, and steel. The data feed was then encoded back into a watchable color image, and downloaded onto the Internet and into television channel servers all over the world.

Each A10 member looked around the huge hall for cameras, for journalists, for any sign of the press. None were visible. The contents of the meeting were supposed to be highly secretive and confidential. Jethro smiled, shaking his head, briefly chuckling at how naïve they were. Super-apes, he thought to himself.

Then he turned ghostly serious.

“Countries of the world and politicians who lead them, you have stated your terms for the surrender of Transhumania. As leader and founder of my nation, I have come here to tell you that we firmly decline your offer.

“You have stated that if we do not surrender, then you will use military power to accomplish your goals and declare a state of war against us. We accept your declaration of war. I hereby make it official: We are now at war.

“With that, I have come here to accept your unconditional surrender, of all your nations and governments as a whole, without any bloodshed. If you do not accept, then my country will forcefully take over your nations and transform them into a greater Transhumania. We have the technology and weaponry to do so, and if you don't believe it, you soon will—by your blood, fear, and suffering, as well as your worldwide humiliation.

“We will begin by destroying every major religious symbol and every major political institution on

Earth. If you force us, we will continue our plight until every one of you is left homeless, hungry, abandoned, and disgraced. Until your cities are in utter chaos. We will shut down the world. We will halt its economies, its governments, its abilities to enforce laws. We will send you back into the Dark Ages. If there is still more resistance that deliberately hinders or interferes with goals of transhumanism, we will eliminate you—each and every one of you who defies us. We will implement a systematic humanicide.

“My country and I are after extreme life enhancement, our own personal immortality, and in creating a far more advanced, rational, and spectacular future for our planet. Many of you are useless to us right now and are therefore completely dispensable. We have the power, and we will methodically use it to destroy any force that purposely stands in the way of our transhuman mission.”

As Jethro's short, explosive speech neared its close, cell phones of the leaders and diplomats began vibrating and ringing. Beeps and chirps from incoming texts and new emails were heard throughout the room.

Jethro raised his voice determinedly. “We have a transitional map for the world to follow if and when you surrender. We are willing to accept those of you who are not with us now to join our effort and help our cause. We encourage this. But to join us you must produce value for us. You must support and augment our mission. You cannot be a parasite. You cannot live off Transhumania. Or off our intellect. Or off our hard work. Or off our courage. Or off our life-changing ideas. You cannot be some useless impediment in our way. We will not accept weak, irrelevant individuals who do not contribute. You must become one of us. You must become productive transhumanists.

“We are moving towards a new epoch, one in which what it means to be a living human entity on Earth will change greatly from past interpretations. Soon, being human will mean little. Everything will be *transhuman*. I hope you will find the strength and wisdom in yourselves to make the right decisions for your best, most advanced future.”

The speech was over in less than two minutes, before leaders of the world even had time to consider what a worldwide broadcast meant to them. Now every cell phone and pager in the room sounded. Senator Michaelson's top aide confirmed to him in a text what Jethro had said: Media networks around the world had tuned in and were airing the speech everywhere. The live news feed was emanating from the Transhumania News Network in the Pacific Ocean.

Just outside the Summit Chamber, scores of diplomats and high-ranking military officers stood flabbergasted, watching a television on the wall. IMN was broadcasting the entire meeting. One aggressive, three-star American general turned from the television and loudly broke into the assembly room with four armed soldiers. He walked directly up to the President of the United States and said, “With your permission, Sir, if we are now at war, then let us arrest this man, Jethro Knights—this so-called tyrant of Transhumania. He will become our first prisoner. He has just broken international law, as well as the sacred code of international diplomacy, by making classified information public to the entire world. It's blatant treason, Mr. President. He has jeopardized the confidential interests of the United States of America and all other A10 nations on his own. His punishment will be a harsh lesson of reality for the rest of the foolhardy transhumanists.”

Heatedly, the President looked at Senator Michaelson, then at the other A10 members, then at his phone—still buzzing from an incoming call by the U.S. Secretary of Defense. Every politician in the Summit Chamber was stung deeply by Jethro's egotistical speech. The transhumanist had succeeded in badly humiliating them publicly. Already, each politician was wondering how this would play out with their constituencies, for their political parties, and in the next elections. Their exasperation was raw.

The Chinese President stood up and pointed at Jethro Knights. “Yes, let us arrest this traitor of humanity, this wizard of spells.”

The Russian Prime Minister, already standing, shouted in a thick accent, “Agreed! Arrest Jethro Knights now. Let us rain down our missiles on this tiny, arrogant transhuman city if they want to fight us, if they choose to defy us so openly in front of our own people. They are a danger and a menace to

the human race.”

The U.S. President looked at the other seven international representatives. Each one decisively gave their consent.

“It is agreed then, General,” the President said. “We are at war with this criminal and with the nation of Transhumania. You have our permission and authority to arrest him.”

The general, Reverend Belinas’ close friend, approached Jethro. His four soldiers moved to surround the transhumanist, their hands on their pistols.

“Jethro Knights,” announced the general, “you are under arrest, by the power vested in the Charter of the United Nations and its statutes, in accordance with the Constitution of the United States and the Geneva Convention.”

“Proceed then,” Jethro said, nodding.

The men handcuffed Jethro and escorted him out of the Summit Chamber. Instead of taking him towards the main entrance to exit the building, the soldiers aggressively diverted him down a long hallway to his left. Gregory watched, knowing what was about to happen. Reverend Belinas waited in the shadows with his two black-clad bodyguards. The three men stepped in behind the military entourage as they walked by. The preacher quietly instructed the soldiers where to take the prisoner. They followed his orders and descended a long flight of stairs towards an underground basement.

## Chapter 29

It was murky and cold when Jethro Knights came back into consciousness. His head was sweltering and bleeding, the result of a rifle butt slammed into his skull. His bio-monitoring T-shirt had been ripped off, leaving him bare-chested.

“Where am I?” Jethro asked a shadowy figure standing behind a glaring spotlight.

“Somewhere no one knows, or is ever going to know.”

Partly blinded by the light, Jethro stared at the figure inquisitively. He wondered if the person had missed the U.N. Assembly and the publicity. The expression on Jethro’s face said, *Don’t you know who I am, you idiot?*

Reverend Belinas sneered. “Oh, don’t think I would be so careless, Mr. Knights. No one can hear you or find you in here. You are in a lead-lined transport with light minutia built in. Signals can’t get through, and if they do, they bounce off confused. Your rescue team might end up looking for you in Antarctica.”

“Lead and light minutia?” Jethro chuckled softly, feeling he was being driven somewhere from the vibration underneath him. He looked more closely, his eyes focusing on the figure behind the light. He recognized the famous reverend in the white gown. “Is that the best you can do, preacher?”

Belinas looked sternly at his bodyguard sitting next to him, then nudged his head at Jethro. The guard grunted, and in one quick motion he rammed the butt of his gun into the prisoner’s forehead. Jethro’s skull stung from the pain as he slowly succumbed to unconsciousness again.

Aggravated, Belinas turned to his other bodyguard and ordered, “Tell the soldiers to speed up. We need to make it to the base as quickly as possible now. They may have a read on us.”

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“What do you mean you goddamn lost him?” Preston Langmore yelled at Transhumania’s lead computer engineer.

No one on the seasteading city had ever seen Dr. Langmore lose his temper before.

"Just for a moment, sir, until our computers reconfigure. Whoever has Mr. Knights is purposely causing some type of signal interference with his location. We'll get him back in thirty to sixty seconds."

The first Hyper-scram aircraft, named *Trano*, loaded with three robots, had departed a half hour before and was now flying seventy-five feet above the Gulf of Mexico at Mach 22—the fastest recorded flight in history. The plane and its mission were being monitored by over 250 personnel in the expansive Transhumania Defense Command Center, on the fifty-first floor of the Technology Tower. The rows of engineers made it look like a NASA space shuttle launch was imminent. In front of the men and women were dozens of consoles and computer screens showing live video and data feeds, some streaming views from the robot's single-eye camera vision system.

"How long before *Trano* is in the area of the convoy?" Langmore asked, pacing like a caged tiger.

Oliver Mbaye turned to him and answered calmly, "Ten minutes and eighteen seconds. We're entering American airspace now."

"He could be dead in ten minutes and eighteen seconds."

"There he is—he's back," said a young engineer. "And his vital signs are returning to normal, sir. The chip signal is yellow. It's picking up everything. It's fantastic. It blinks yellow when his heart rate is normal, orange when it's elevated, and red when it's dangerously elevated."

At least something was going right, Langmore thought. Jethro Knights, as well as 500 other scientists on Transhumania, had undergone microchip implantation last year, after first-stage testing showed no incompatibilities or negative effects with the brain's synaptic nerve system. The chip, which was integrated into the back of the skull, served as a recording and recognition data device capable of being globally tracked by Transhumanian supercomputers. It also monitored the body's vital signs through blood flow, body temperature, and electrolyte count.

The microchip implant was still in its trial phase, but as usual, Jethro volunteered for all the important experiments on Transhumania. He was currently third in line for the eagerly awaited robotic hand replacement, reputed to be only four years away from reaching a functional prototype stage. The alloy-based hand was to be over seven times stronger than the human hand, and ten times more sensitive to touch and stimuli. The two robotic inventors were first in line to receive it.

Langmore had chosen not to have the microchip implanted in his head, letting the younger scientists go first. He was more careful than the others—perhaps a sign of aging, he thought. Nevertheless, as he watched—from 3,000 miles away—Jethro's vital signs on the monitor, he was grateful Jethro had undergone the surgery.

A moment later, the computer screen signals from Jethro's chip spiked, and a red light flashed. A warning sign also appeared on the monitor.

"What's that?" Langmore asked. "That can't be normal."

"No sir, it's not," the engineer whispered. "They must've roughed him up again, maybe hit his head, but this time closer to the chip. There may be some damage. We'll run diagnostics again."

"Just don't lose him," chimed in Oliver, edgy now. "Start the backup triangulations. I want every available resource watching him. All the backups in the Bahamas and Russia too. Take resources from Morocco online now as well."

"Yes sir," answered the engineer, typing rapidly onto his computer.

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With a black hood bound tightly over his head, Jethro Knights slowly regained consciousness as Reverend Belinas' bodyguards roughly transferred him onto a trolley stretcher. They were in a huge,

artificially lit cave: the entrance to a secret underground military compound in a remote region of the Appalachian Mountains in western Virginia. Aside from a dirt road winding through rocky terrain leading to the complex, there was no sign of human activity around the area for fifty miles in any direction. Directly inside the cave's entrance were military jeeps, stacked anti-aircraft rocket launchers, and a squad of eighteen alert soldiers ready for battle.

Belinas signaled with his left hand to the commanding lieutenant. Immediately, the hydraulically operated titanium doors—over a foot thick and painted in the same colors as the surrounding terrain—began closing off the cave to the outside world. Belinas and his bodyguards turned and wheeled Jethro thirty yards down a stone ramp, and slowly descended into the mountain. They passed numerous steel doors that led into various detention cells on both their left and right. When they reached the bottom of the compound, they took him inside a musty concrete room that was thirty-feet by thirty-feet: a dungeon. Its sturdy walls were fortified with over ten thousand tons of rebar and lead. Dozens of glowing floodlights and red power cords ran across the ceiling. In one corner of the room was a long plank of splintery wood and material for waterboarding. In another corner was a rusty table with dentistlike instruments on top of it—tools for painful methods of torture. Another corner had a sharply pointed Judas cradle in it. Lining the walls of the room were rusty chains for hanging people upside down.

Jethro was stripped naked and placed upright on a wooden stool in the middle of the room. The bodyguards tightly handcuffed his wrists together in front of him, then removed the black hood covering his head. Finally, they doused him with a bucket of ice water. It stunned him into full consciousness. He shook the water from his eyes. His head throbbed, and blood dripped down his left cheek from the wound near his eyebrow.

Belinas entered the room, ordering his bodyguards to wait outside and to shut the bulky steel door behind them. When the men were gone, the preacher began walking around the room slowly, ominously. He stopped at the surgical tools on the table, wincing at their meticulous craftsmanship.

“Mr. Knights,” the preacher said, turning to his prisoner, “I am responsible for your wife’s painful death.”

Belinas waited a moment to let his words make their full impact on Jethro. Then he continued, “And I will be responsible for your death too. Your final hours can be much more excruciating than hers—or much less. You may be allowed to live a few extra days, possibly weeks, or maybe even months, if you fully cooperate. It’s your choice. If not, like *your* philosophy, I’ll do whatever necessary to get what I want.”

Belinas continued his examination of the torture instruments. He picked up the crudest looking tool: spiked, stainless steel forceps designed for painful eyeball extraction. While holding it, he said, “Three years ago, the NFSA discovered and built this extraordinary place. It’s a clandestine military prison built under a mountain. Only a handful of public officials in America know about it. Not even the U.S. President is aware of its existence. Its various detention chambers were designed to unlock secrets of state enemies, to torment and break every one of you blasphemous transhumanists, if necessary. Escape is impossible. And I guarantee no one can see or hear us down here, regardless of what technology you think you possess. This is a very dark and lonely place. It’s for God’s eyes and ears only.”

Jethro glared at him, livid from the admission about Zoe Bach.

“What do you want?” he forced himself to ask calmly.

Belinas appeared eased by the question. He looked forward to a philosophical dialogue with such a worthy adversary. He was in no hurry to begin the gruesome process of extracting concessions from Jethro regarding the future of Transhumania and its unparalleled technologies. He put down the spiked forceps.

“A cigarette?” Belinas asked.

“I don’t smoke.”

“No, of course not. That wouldn't be very practical for a transhumanist.” He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and took his time lighting up.

“But then again, since you can cure cancer on Transhumania, you can enjoy some bodily vices, huh?”

“What do you want, preacher?” Jethro asked again, harshness in his voice this time.

Belinas smiled and indulged in a slow drag off his cigarette. He walked to a chair six feet in front of Jethro and sat down.

“Now come on, Mr. Knights. Isn't it obvious? I want to do the right thing for the human race, which is to spread God's will on Earth. And to do so I need power. Just like you. I want power so I can control the world and push it down a righteous path—one that is short on sin, long on submission, and devoid of people like you.”

“You want to rule the world so you can force people into following your subjective concept of God's supposed will?”

“Your crude, simplistic wording leaves so much to be desired; however, technically, yes. And ruling the world would be easier right now if you God-killers weren't around to spread your blasphemy. Incidentally, ruling would also be easier if America and I had the science and technology your city possesses.”

“Why do you want to possess the science and technology you've fought so vehemently against?”

Belinas sighed. “I have the authority and faith to guide human beings to believe in God and live according to His tenets. You have the gifts of science and technology—which, if left unchecked, will lead them astray. I need all of it together in one hand that only I can open and close as needed. Not all science and technology are evil. But only a God-fearing man should be able to determine that. Otherwise, he might believe he can out-think God by using his gifts.”

Jethro shrugged. “I don't understand you people. Or why I should fear something like God. Or why I shouldn't be able to out-think something like God. Or why I should even consider your concept of God beyond a few rudimentary tautologies which show it's an unproven concept in a universe of many proven things. It would be irrational and a waste of time to make more of it. And yet, you people build civilizations upon it, form cultures around it, live your lives for it—and then insist on standing in the way of transhumanism, at the obvious expense of your own well-being and evolutionary advancement.”

Belinas snickered, watching Jethro, amused by what he considered his unconscionable naivety. He was struck by one fundamental issue with the man: his utter lack of fear. The reverend had never seen such confidence so perfectly manifested in any one person before, even as this transhumanist was perhaps only an hour away from his death.

“Yet, Mr. Knights, not understanding any of this has never really bothered you, has it? It hasn't kept the creator of TEF and the omnipotender up at night? Not even once?”

Jethro considered it and said, “No, I can't say it has. Not even once.”

The preacher grunted and threw his head back. More than ever, he saw Jethro as a critical threat.

Belinas declared, “That's so typical of your overman breed, of which you are its chief architect and philosopher. Your problem is that you're not an atheist; you're not even an antitheist. You're an *apatheist*—one who doesn't care to find out if he should know God.”

“That's true,” Jethro answered simply. “It's just not an expedient use of my time. I have too much value in my own life for the need to consider, or want, anything else.”

“You've never been fearful you might be wrong about that? You've never been afraid you might miss out on knowing the Creator of the universe?”

“Nope. Never.”

“You are utterly classic, Mr. Knights,” Belinas said, abruptly standing up from his chair. He began pacing the room, his thoughts lassoing an epiphany. He turned towards Jethro and said, “Don't you see? Your greatest failure as a human being is your total lack of its main philosophical condition: fear. For

us who know you, that is your perfect sin. Because without the basic understanding of fear, or even caring to understand it, you have no empathy of it, no knowledge of it. A man without fear doesn't need God. He doesn't need to consider God. And a man who doesn't need to consider God—well, that's one very dangerous man."

"Why is that person dangerous?"

"Because he's not afraid of being all-powerful. He thinks and acts for himself, and only himself. He scoffs at karma and fate, caring only about how he interprets and masters his immediate reality. He lacks the dread that pervades the whole world: the deep-rooted phobia of playing God. It's the specific primary fear that keeps everyone in check, keeps everyone muted and nervous. It's what makes a driver stop at a red light when no one else is at the intersection. Or a thief decline to steal a purse from a blind lady on a deserted street. Or the President of the United States—the most powerful man in the world—attend church on Sunday when he'd rather be watching a football playoff game. It's what makes humanity, altruism, and religion possible as we know it. Otherwise, everyone would just do what they wanted, when they wanted; in other words, they would act just as God does."

Jethro flashed back to the moment he walked out of Professor Rindall's philosophy class at Victoria University. Belinas' articulation was spot-on. This was the essence of the world's unmasked collective soul, the quintessential character flaw of all societies—that people were bred and conditioned to be afraid to do what they most deeply wanted to do: become invincible. They were terrified to try and become the very thing they worshiped: God. Very few in the world wanted, possessed the courage for, or could handle, that kind of responsibility. Jethro had been warring with the human race's ubiquitous sheepishness for years, and Belinas knew everything about that sheepishness; he knew everything about the blatant brainwashing and yoking of the species' pugnacious mind and spirit.

"The Holy Scripture says: *The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom*," Belinas announced, sensing Jethro's thoughts.

Jethro quickly raised his eyebrows. "What drivel. If there's any value at all in your fearmongering book of rules, it's the myth of Satan: the archangel who rebelled against God because he wanted to rule the heavens himself. Apparently your God wasn't strong enough to scare him and his legion of demons into submission."

The reverend waved his hand condescendingly, as if swatting something away.

"Mr. Knights, I'm quite sure you're intelligent enough to understand why fear is essential for governing the human race. The whole point is to turn people into frightened little children—God's children. One of the Bible's other most venerable sayings is: *Unless you change and become a child, you will never enter into the kingdom of Heaven*. Which makes perfect sense when you think about it. Why would God want fearless adversaries or troublemakers in His universe? When people are afraid, they yield, they listen, they submit. That's the way God likes it. That's the way America likes it. That's the way *I* like it."

"Preacher, it astounds me you don't believe more in the human race; that you forgo the opportunity to give people the chance to become something more than they are today. Why must your religion insist on so much submission, control, and scaremongering? People don't have to be afraid. If taught properly, some could rise up and become powerful, perhaps as powerful as what you imagine God to be like. At the very least, they wouldn't be afraid to try."

Belinas chuckled and shook his head. "Mr. Knights, are you joking? The human soul is made of cotton candy. No one is going to rise up against almighty God and become omnipotent. No one has that kind of power, intellect, or capacity. It's completely absurd."

"It's *not* absurd. Every transhumanist believes and hopes they will become omnipotent in the future."

"Because they're delusional egomaniacs full of madness and subversion," responded Belinas sharply, losing his composure for an instant. He threw his cigarette to the ground and smothered it with his sandal. "Besides, if nobody were afraid of being God, then global chaos would instantly ensue."

Dissolution of the world order would be rapid and inevitable. Everything for which Christians and the West have worked so hard over the past millennium would collapse. People would start to clash and war with one another; not just country against country, or ethnic group against ethnic group, but every single person versus the other. Billions versus billions. Anyone and everyone, stabbing each other in the back for the highest position of power they could attain. No remorse. No guilt. No fear. Anarchist individualism ruling the streets. The future would be unpredictable and treacherous.”

“You and your cronies haven’t been doing your jobs as well as you think, preacher. Part of that future is already here. The core of the sentient world has always been like that, from the weakest species in the animal kingdom to the strongest. Every gene in our body is imbued with this necessity to triumph the existing competition. Survival of the fittest. You can sugarcoat reality for yourself however you want, but the indelible nature of evolution always remains paramount. This is the main force propelling the world forward.”

“Nonsense, Mr. Knights. The moral and cultural mindset that religious authorities have painstakingly instilled in the human race has been propelling the world forward. We defeated your transhuman-friendly evolutionary theories long before they were even hatched, by introducing a handful of maxims which the world has swallowed whole for thousands of years. I’m sure you know them by heart too, even if you despise them: *Love thy enemies. Man is small, but God is great. Faith is more powerful than reason. Only a life lived for others is a life lived worthwhile. All people are created equal. The strong have a moral obligation to help the weak. Seek God in all things you do. Selflessness trumps selfishness. If you understand it, it is not God. If someone strikes you on the cheek, turn to him the other cheek too. Ignorance is bliss. Judge not so that you won’t be judged. Whoever is the greatest among you is the least. True knowledge exists in knowing you know nothing.* And my favorite modern ‘hip’ one: *Love is all you need.*”

Belinas smiled. “Do you see a reoccurring theme, Mr. Knights? These altruistic and egalitarian ideals have been the cornerstone of all religious and social progress in the modern world. They’re unstoppable in their implications.”

“They’re all misleading lies, a con game, a blatant upending of mammalian proclivity to deceive and gain control. Are you not interested in real truths at all?”

“Those maxims *are* the truth—God’s truths. They’re the most beautiful and instrumental truths in the world. By teaching them to the human race, we’ve leveled the playing field for everyone, thus connecting every man, woman, and child to each other in every way, regardless of self-worth. Equality is everywhere—and best of all, it’s free.”

“You’ve chained every person to each other through falsities that hinder potential. Furthermore, equality doesn’t exist; therefore, it can’t be free. Behind everyone in the universe is a statistical value—definable, measurable, comparable, and distinctive. A person’s most important function in life is to plug that value—high or low, strong or weak—into a single equation that asks the question: How can I attain as much power as efficiently as possible? And then to pursue the answer as the highest calling in their life.”

“Callings, Mr. Knights? I’m sure you realize most of us have very different callings than you, such as implementing God’s glory and spiritual instruction throughout the Earth. And to that end, our ideas have been very sound and efficient for the world. Organized religion’s moral and egalitarian seeds have successfully combated humanity’s darker intuitions, as well as sprouting angelic manners for billions of loutish souls. The harvest has been quite welcome and bountiful. Of course, it hasn’t been perfect. We haven’t totally eliminated brute competition, selfishness, anti-religious action, or barebones evil. Nor hunger, disease, and poverty. Nevertheless, much of the world’s transgressions, ungodliness, and savagery have become highly subdued. It’s safe to say that now, since mostly everyone anywhere in the world can manage in one way or another and still pursue a path to God with a fair measure of hope and prosperity.”

“You mean crumbs, preacher. That fair measure of hope and prosperity is so limited and feeble,

even for the wealthiest or the most powerful of you. It still only leads to a coffin and nonexistence. You may have achieved a small measure of control over the human race with your lies and deception, but the tradeoff was getting the world stuck in the age of the beggarly super-ape. And now you have no way out of it.”

“Come now, Mr. Knights,” Belinas said sarcastically, raising his eyebrows. “Do you really think your proposal and strategy for the world’s future is better than ours—than God’s? Consider your aim: global mutiny of the entire human race; a spiritual, psychological, and biological insurrection on a scale never before witnessed. You want to challenge and overthrow nearly every righteous and civil ideal humankind and modern progress have achieved, in order to become something abnormal, grotesque, and blasphemous. In order to become something *transhuman*.”

“What I want is for capable people in the world to realize we can be so much more than just human beings, and to act rationally and swiftly upon that truth without remorse, fear, or interference from others who disagree.”

“Honestly, Mr. Knights, who will listen? More importantly, how can you win? Ninety-seven percent of the planet’s population is religious, and many people thoroughly disagree with transhumanism and its ideals. It contradicts their innermost beliefs.”

“Who gives a damn about most people? The capable will listen, and they’re the only ones who really matter.”

“And what of the billions of others?”

“Those others will be given a choice. If they fail to join and add something positive, screw them.”

Belinas slapped his knees, frustrated. “Have you really zero concern for the opinions and well-being of nearly the entire human race? Would you really leave all of us by the wayside?”

“Yes, if I must. I have no concern for anyone or anything unless it can help me or the transhuman movement.”

“That’s utterly outrageous, even from a deplorable megalomaniac like yourself,” Belinas replied. “Your scheme of a winner-takes-all scenario would be a terrible descent into global mayhem and savagery.”

Jethro shot back, “As human beings continue to improve and transcend themselves—especially their evolution into super-machines—nonfunctional philosophies and influences such as yours will be dropped for expediency. It doesn’t mean global mayhem and savagery, it means stiffer, more consequential competition. People will step up and learn to deal or be lost.”

Belinas ran his hands over his scalp as if fathoming the enormity of a revelation. He looked directly into Jethro’s eyes and said slowly, “For Christ’s sake, we should’ve killed you a long time ago. The world you propose is catastrophically dangerous.”

“It doesn’t seem dangerous to me.”

“Perhaps not to you, Mr. Philosopher. But it’s dangerous to the rest of us, to those billions who need and love God, and who rely on His guidance and rules. It’s dangerous to those who count on the altruism and kindness of other human beings to survive. It’s dangerous to those who have few battle skills and will surely be losers in your desired transhuman future. It’s dangerous to those who are already overwhelmed with just living, whose struggle to survive for fifty or sixty years on this planet is crushing enough. And that means nearly all human beings, except your kind. People should be terrified of the world you are proposing.”

“Only a fool human lives his life in fear because of the things you speak of. The only fear warranted is possibly the fear of failing to be omnipotent. And those people you speak of are losers because they choose to be.”

Belinas brusquely waved his hand in the air again. “Of course, Mr. Knights. It’s just like you to feel that way. Do you remember what you said in your first public Transhumanian speech in Cape Town? That you would kill all of us if you had to. That you would murder every single human being who was against you on this planet if it were in your best interest. The Humanicide Formula is

embedded into the core of your Three Laws of Transhumanism. Fundamentally, you don't consider us worth giving a damn about."

"Do the people of the world give a damn about me? Do they give a damn about transhumanists? Do they even fundamentally give a damn about each other? With the exception of Transhumanians, all people and their governments have been sanctioning and carrying out formulas of mass murder for centuries. Every time they accept anti-science laws instead of pro-science laws, every time they embrace restrictive religious attitudes instead of freethinking human enhancement attitudes, every time they pay for trillion-dollar wars abroad instead of funding trillion-dollar wars at home against cancer, heart disease, or old age, they are prematurely ending the lives of their fellow human beings. Premeditated or not, their participation constitutes a quantifiable contribution to an ongoing global humanicide. The truth is undeniable. All but transhumanists are guilty executioners of their fellow humans' precious life hours."

"That's absolute nonsense."

"Yet, there's something far worse than mass murder, isn't there, preacher? Something else that somehow you've gotten so many humans to accept unconditionally. We don't even have a word for what I'm talking about because it's so preposterous. No evil can compare to what some of the world's major religions have fated for billions of people—what Jehovah, Jesus, or Allah plans to do on his purported Judgment Day. They each have a formula for carrying out the mass sentencing of an 'eternal punishment of suffering' of those who don't worship them and follow their rules. Regardless of which religion it is, most of the human race will be forever enslaved into a horrifying and excruciating hell."

Jethro raised his eyebrows and stared at Belinas. "Honestly, preacher, could any person—whether it be Hitler, Saddam Hussein, or Pol Pot—ever rival the diabolical madness that Jesus, Mohammed, or the Popes envisioned and endorsed for billions of human beings? Those religious prophets and leaders who laid down their rules and designs for the world were the epitomes of evil. Their formulas for who gets into heaven and who burns in eternal hell are far worse than any ideas conceived on Transhumania. My nation's philosophy and its methods lead to greater, more productive life hours for the species as a whole. Theirs leads to a paltry sect of humans attaining bliss, while all others get charred forever in lakes of fire. Is it possible to imagine a worse, more malevolent judgment than one that forces an individual to undergo an eternity of total agony—let alone the eternal agonies of many billions of people throughout the ages? Your religions are totally asinine."

"*No one* should judge God," Belinas said obstinately. "Humans don't have the capacity to comprehend The Omniscient One's methods and decrees. Only He who gives life and takes life can wield such power and understanding."

"You may have convinced billions of human lemmings around the world of that, but not transhumanists. We smelled the bullshit right away. We know the truth: *Religion equals death.*"

"*Religion equals salvation,*" Belinas retorted angrily.

Both men glowered at each other. The silence in the dungeon was palpable.

"Regrettably, Mr. Knights, reciprocal empathetic communication with someone like you is impossible. You're an alien. You're missing the main spiritual organ in life: a soul that is afraid. Life has never scared you into submission. Life has never damaged you enough to change you. If it were somehow possible, and you were forced into a predicament where the only way to reach your goal was to kill your wife, then you would kill her, unafraid. You would murder her a thousand times to reach your immortality, if required. That's how brutal you are at the core, how monstrous and evil you are."

Jethro threw his head back, a shiver filling his body. Belinas had penetrated him, and found a vulnerable point. Jethro remembered how grueling and twisting it was after Zoe died. Remembered the utter pain, confusion, sadness. Despite this, the transhumanist forced himself to answer, clearly and firmly, "What you say is true, preacher. I would kill my wife a thousand times if I absolutely had to in order to reach my goals. But the reality is, and will always be, that I love my wife. I love her so utterly much even now, years later. And I would do an infinite amount of things to avoid the perverse

predicament you propose.”

Aggravated, Belinas pulled out another cigarette and lit it.

“I believe you, Mr. Knights; however, it hardly makes you less of a monster. You’re no less the devil. Any God-fearing person would give up his goal, or compromise on his goal, or change his goal. Because life would be too much for him otherwise. Too overwhelming. Too painful. Too punishing. The pangs of existence would force his humility and submission. But not you. Not the *omnipotender*. Not the man who has no fear of replacing God with himself. Or taking a billion lives. You wouldn’t change in the slightest. A man who can love as much as you and can also murder like you—all in the same moment, in the same action—shouldn’t be a part of this world. You’re an anomaly, the most potent deadly cancer, a blinding evil in a spiritual universe. You’re the potential Antichrist and are dangerous to the delicate equilibrium of life we have on this social planet. It’s not wise to allow cataclysmic game-changers in the form of a single being.”

“But this is my planet. And it’s not just a single being who thinks this way. It’s another million of them around the globe, some living on Transhumania, all of them leaders and exceptional individuals. They’re not people killing their loved ones in some crazy philosophical twist you propose; they’re people making it so others and themselves can live longer, safer, healthier lives in greater prosperity. That’s the reality transhumanists create, even if they appear selfish and inhumane.”

“While the majority of beings become impoverished,” Belinas snapped back. “While they live in squalor, go hungry, experience misery, breed sin, and get left out of the godlike advances you create. Oh, and of course, they will certainly miss out on that great evil you suggest as possibly coming: the Singularity.”

“We didn’t force others into that pathetic position, preacher. Rather, you led them there with your philosophies of fear and control. And with your impossible insistence on equality, which stunted their ability to use reason to advance themselves.”

Belinas shifted his body away for a moment, trying to calm himself. The anger in him was amassing. He turned back and stiffly said, “I lead them to where their capacities—as limited as they are—can handle God and His will on terms by which they don’t betray their brothers and sisters, or their countries, or their own souls, or their planet. Or do you really think the whole world could live on Transhumania and be prosperous, and ponder incredible calculus equations, and work twenty-hour days, and strive to be omnipotenders with no fear of anything? Do you really think the average taxi driver, or burger flipper, or busty waitress with flashy painted eyelashes could be a part of your elitist nation? Or the future transhuman world you’re hoping for?”

“I believe in giving them the choice. I believe in trying to teach them so they can contribute. Then kicking them out if they fail. Otherwise, if they don’t belong, people will sink the ship with their cumbersome weight. Such is the coarse reality of the evolutionary inheritance built into the universe and the TEF philosophy. But I do try to give them the choice.”

“Well, I’m much kinder than you, Jethro Knights. I’m a humanitarian and a God-fearing man. Since I know choice is irrelevant for them. They desperately need dogmatic control. Or they will fail. They will sin. They will fall short and betray themselves, others, and God. They will become devil-minded brutes. So I lead them to a place where they don’t get kicked out, where they can live out their lives under God’s careful watch and infinite forgiveness. I carry them when I have to—they’re never too heavy for me. That is the difference between you and me, between God and you. We don’t leave anyone behind. We don’t discriminate against the weak. If anything, we discriminate against the strong and arrogant.”

“But many of them are weak precisely because you never gave them the chance or the choice to be strong. You screwed them up on the first day you brought the concepts of ‘God’ or ‘sin’ or ‘submission’ or ‘humility’ or ‘fear’ or ‘universal equality’ into their thinking.”

“Nonsense. They would think that on their own naturally. It’s crafted into the biology of our brains. God put it there.”

“Why? I didn't think that. No one put it there for me.”

Belinas was furious now. Yet, he wasn't quite ready to begin waterboarding Jethro. He wondered how long he would last. Or if he was the honorable type to die first. The President and others in Congress wouldn't like that. Screw them, Belinas thought. There would just have to be some explanation of an accident. Killing Jethro Knights was in the best interest of billions of people. Belinas knew God approved. And the preacher overwhelmingly approved himself. It was all that mattered.

A moment later, the ceiling above them began to hum; lightly at first, then louder, until the entire compound was vibrating like a miniature earthquake. An engine making massive thunder was descending upon them. Belinas jumped up, unsure of what was happening. Then he understood when he saw Jethro grinning.

“You evil bastard,” the preacher shouted. He jumped up and ran for the door. The bodyguard on the other side opened it right as Belinas reached it, and said, “Reverend, I think we're under attack. I've just been radioed by the lieutenant that some sort of giant aircraft is hovering outside the cave.”

Jethro glared at Belinas, who turned back at him irately. There was mockery and murder in the transhumanist's eyes.

## Chapter 30

“He's right there, sir,” said the Transhumanian engineer to Preston Langmore, pointing to Jethro Knights' image on the computer screen. “He's quite far into the mountain—thirty-five meters or more. That's his heatwave body form, and the microchip in his head is blinking orange. The bots will deploy any second.”

“There they go,” announced Oliver Mbaye. He was watching a giant video screen—thirty feet by twenty feet—dominating the south wall in the Transhumania Defense Command Center. It aired everything the robots viewed from their Cyclops-like eyes. On the bottom left and right of the video screen flashed dozens of changing instructions and logistics. They were data messages being directly transmitted from the robots; it showed their positions, circumstances, and environmental assessments.

Forty yards from the military compound's cavelike entrance, the flying drone *Trano*—nearly the length of a tennis court and with wings just as wide—hovered twenty-five feet off the ground. Its three glowing jet propulsion streams—each the diameter of a 100-year-old redwood tree trunk—created a deafening noise and blackened the earth underneath the ship. From the aircraft's cargo door, Soldierbot and Weaponbot—each at least eight feet tall—jumped in succession to the ground. It was a jump no sane human would ever attempt. Two U.S. Army soldiers, hiding in a nearby camouflaged bunker built into the mountain, fired their M-60 machine guns at the steel masses falling to earth. But the bullets bounced futilely off them. Both robots landed perfectly, then stood up and scanned their surroundings, doing out thousands of calculations for their personal avatars sitting behind computers back at the command center on Transhumania.

After taking its scan, Soldierbot, gripping a golden cubelike gun, took aim and fired twice at the enemy soldiers in the bunker. There were no missed shots; both men were instantly killed. The robot used micro-GPS satellite triangulation when shooting. Wind, moisture, and dust in the air were accounted for via built-in sensors on its weapon. The margin of error for hitting its targets was less than a centimeter.

From the compound, the cave's titanium doors opened, and three military jeeps carrying six soldiers each rushed out. The vehicles raced down the dirt road towards the aircraft, a trail of dust following them. When they neared the robots, the soldiers jumped out and took positions behind their jeeps, firing at the machines with their M-22s. Two of the soldiers carrying anti-aircraft weapons launched rockets at the stationary Transhumanian plane.

Weaponbot, bearing a hefty, canon-shaped right arm, quickly turned and took aim at the rockets streaming toward the ship. Using laser-guided precision, the robot's arm weapon began spinning upon itself with astonishing speed. Out of it came a river of seven-inch armor-penetrating bullets that colored the surrounding air black. The ammunition was loaded in from an inflexible tube leading to a steel backpack on the machine's tall frame. The U.S. rockets were easily shot out of the sky before they neared the airship. Then Weaponbot turned, aimed its arm at the soldiers, and fired. Within seconds, every man was pelted. Bones snapped in half. Flesh was ripped asunder. Legs, heads, and torsos flew everywhere. One of the jeeps exploded when it was hit, which sent smoke billowing.

When no humans in sight remained alive, Weaponbot turned around and stood unmoving, scanning the area, guarding the airship; its camera eye beamed shades of neon orange light from the middle of its round metallic forehead.

From the drone, two ports opened and missile heads inched out of the hull. At the imaging system back in Transhumania's command center, calculations in a computer were made to fire two short-range rockets, to destroy the titanium cave door and give Soldierbot access to the compound.

On a nearby monitor, Preston Langmore watched horrified as three human-shaped heat images interacted erratically with each other in a basementlike room in the cave. One of the images pulled an L-shaped metallic object from the other and walked briskly to a fourth, seated figure. He pointed the object at the man's head. The head belonged to Jethro Knights. A signal on the computer screen began flashing bright red.

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Reverend Belinas screamed at his two bodyguards, "How the hell did they find us? We're underground in the mountains, hidden in a half million tons of concrete and lead."

The two guards were standing in the doorway of the torture room, trying to make radio contact with the lieutenant. All they could hear from their single walkie-talkie was rapid gunfire, aircraft engines, and the wailing of soldiers.

Then, in an instant, the shooting and wailing stopped, and only the roar of the aircraft could be heard.

Belinas screamed again. "How in God's name did they find us?"

Clueless, the guards looked at each other. They were surprised the reverend was even asking them. "I don't know, Reverend," answered the senior guard. "But what should we do?"

"Protect me, you idiot. Guard the door. Close it behind me and shoot anyone who comes down here. We'll wait for army reinforcements. I'm sure the emergency signal was tripped and they'll arrive shortly."

Belinas turned to go, but spun around abruptly, and said, "Wait—give me your pistol first."

The bodyguard obeyed and shut the heavy steel door behind him. Belinas walked towards Jethro Knights and cocked the .45 caliber handgun. The preacher raised the gun and pointed it at him, a half meter away from his face.

"Whatever happens here today, Mr. Knights, I swear on the power of almighty God, you are not leaving here alive."

The next moments defied all of Belinas' expectations. Jethro laughed out loud, unhurried. It was a booming, contemptuous sound from the depths of his stomach.

"Now who's being naïve, preacher? You're still like an ape on the savannah. And your God is just an imaginary manifestation in your primitive cortex. Don't you know you don't have enough bullets in that gun to kill me? A surgery center ten times more advanced than anything on this continent is on that aircraft up there. My rescue team will be here in less than sixty seconds. No matter what you do here

now, you're the loser. And I swear upon my nation, your life and the space you take up in our world are just about over."

Fear shot out of Belinas' eyes. The reverend didn't want to believe it. He wouldn't believe it. He glowered at Jethro, and wrathfully pulled his gun's trigger. But at the same instant that the bullet ignited, the underground compound rocked hard all around him. A massive explosion somewhere in the cave had erupted, shifting the structure of the complex. Belinas toppled over onto his knees as the gun fired. The bullet whizzed forward and penetrated Jethro's shoulder right below the collar bone. The transhumanist yelled out in pain and clenched his fists. Belinas tried to get up and shoot again, but Jethro was quicker. He jumped out of the chair with his handcuffed hands, sprinted four steps, and punted the preacher in the torso with the full force of his right foot. Belinas lifted six inches into the air, gasping as bones cracked in his rib cage.

Jethro was about to kick him in the head, but just then a second explosion, vastly more violent than the first one, rattled the underground structure. A giant fireball careened from the cave's entrance inward and spanned the entire length of the compound, scorching everything in its path. Belinas' two bodyguards watched in disbelief as the inferno raced towards them. When the blast reached the guards, it threw them into each other and lit them on fire. Falling rock from the shaking cave ceiling pummeled the screaming men as they burned to death.

Inside Jethro's room, the jolt from the second explosion sent him flying into the air. He threw his bound hands over his head to protect himself as he collided with the cement wall. Around him, he could feel the temperature soaring, but the heavy metal door, now partly buried in rock, protected him and Belinas from the worst of the inferno. Jethro raised his sweaty, chained hands to his mouth, trying to filter the dust and smoke he was breathing.

When everything was still and the heat had dissipated, Jethro staggered up. Debris was everywhere. All the tables and chairs were overturned. Instruments and tools littered the cracked, uneven floor. He found Belinas near the room's entrance. The preacher was disoriented and trying to dig himself out of rubble—a concrete wall had partly collapsed on him. Jethro roughly pulled Belinas from the wreckage and jumped behind him, wrapping his handcuffs around the preacher's throat. He squeezed the chains tight.

Littered air and smoke were ubiquitous, but they began filtering out through some of the broken walls and holes in the ceiling. Tiny, faraway rays of sunlight from the cave's entrance beamed sporadically above them. Belinas heaved hard, gasping for breaths, begging Jethro not to choke him to death.

"Don't worry, preacher. Not yet. Not until you see what I want you to see."

It was surprisingly quiet now. The aircraft had quickly landed and shut off its engines. Soon, just outside the damaged entryway of the torture room, someone began moving rubble. Huge chunks of concrete were heard being lifted away. Rebar was twisted and ripped out with intense strength. Belinas still couldn't see much because of the filthy air and smoke. His ears, however, heard the use of hydraulic parts and metal scraping against cement. The preacher tried calling out to his guards, but no one answered. He thought it was strange that the person digging only a few feet away from him didn't shout or ask anything, either of himself or of Jethro.

After another thirty seconds, a handlike object pushed through a crumbling hole in the wall near Belinas. It possessed seven fingers: three of them smaller and more intricate than those of humans; four were much larger and more powerful. The hand was made of a metal-based compound, trending slightly to an orange hue, but it wasn't a metal known to more than a few thousand people. Jethro immediately recognized which robot it was from its finger configuration.

The metal hand reached deeper into the room and touched Belinas' left thigh, slowly dragging its sharp fingers against it until it reached his ankle.

"Get that thing off me," Belinas cried, trying to jump back.

The robot tightened its grip on the preacher's ankle and crushed it like an overripe strawberry.

“Soldierbot—stop.”

Immediately the metal hand released the crippled foot, responding to its commander's voice.

Belinas sobbed, and stared in disbelief at his destroyed ankle, its cracked bones shooting through his skin. Blood oozed everywhere. Soon his sobs quieted though, as he registered shock at what emerged from the smoke. Belinas watched an eight-foot robot rip out a chunk of wall near him, then agilely fit through the small opening to enter the room. Inside, the robot stood up straight, appearing in its full form. Thin streams of light radiated around its haunting figure. Its head was just inches below the fractured ceiling. It peered into Belinas' eyes.

“Oh no. It can't be,” Belinas whimpered.

“Yes, preacher, it *can*—and it *is*. Welcome to the future of the Transhuman Revolution.”

Belinas' mind frantically ran through various scenarios. He unconsciously grabbed the miniature wooden cross on his neck and began reciting a prayer.

“Where is God now, Belinas?” whispered Jethro into his ear. “This is your God. And it's here for me to command. Part of its main microprocessor chip is already in my head. That's how it found me. You could say we're almost *one* already.”

The reverend stared, horrified. He rubbed his cross fanatically, trying not to understand, yearning for a miracle.

“Soldierbot, clear the way out of this room. We are leaving now.”

Belinas watched, aghast, as the machine immediately obeyed. It began working and moving pieces of concrete ten times the weight of its metallic body.

Jethro tightened his handcuffs around the preacher's neck, so that his air pipes were completely closed off. The preacher couldn't breathe, but he was too stunned and weak to resist. He was dying.

When the way was clear, the robot turned around and looked at Jethro, ready for orders.

“Soldierbot, come here. Look into this human's eyes. Ten centimeters from his face.”

Belinas' last moments of life were spent looking into the machine's single orange eye, and feeling Jethro's handcuffs clenching his throat tighter and tighter.

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Jethro Knights was nearly halfway back to Transhumania, rocketing across the sky in *Trano*, as Medibot completed the last stitches of his shoulder's bullet removal surgery. For a man who had just undergone a serious medical operation and was drugged with painkillers and antibiotics, Jethro seemed vivacious and unfazed. Adrenalin pumped through him. He savored his thoughts: The archenemy of transhumanism is dead. The killer of my wife is dead.

Soon after Jethro landed on Transhumania, U.S. Army reinforcements arrived at the attacked military compound in western Virginia. The carnage and damage they found shocked them. Quickly, the news was reported up the military's chain of command, eventually reaching the U.S. President. After discussions with his Cabinet, the President chose to give the media full access to the scene at the secret military compound. Dead soldiers were gathered together and laid in a row with an American flag flying behind them. Their opaque faces were filmed so the public could see what Transhumania had done. Grieving families were allowed to visit the compound, and footage was shown of them weeping over their fallen kin. A surveillance video of the fighting was aired; it revealed Transhumania's robots as haunting, alienlike creatures without feeling, without human morality.

Reverend Belinas' body was included in the show. That night in a live speech, the President emotionally praised him as a dear friend, a dedicated minister of God, and an American patriot. He also announced, along with his A10 counterparts, that war was officially declared on Transhumania and that battle plans were being devised.

Ironically, the candid media coverage in the United States didn't have the government's desired effect on the public. Sympathy was cast aside in favor of sheer wonder. People were shocked at how far Transhumania's technology had advanced; how one man, an advanced airship, and a few robots could destroy a whole army squad with no losses of their own—literally on the army's home turf.

Then the bombshell came, upending everything. Transhumania dispatched its own broadcast and story of Jethro Knights' abduction only thirty seconds after the President's live speech ended. Jethro's chip had recorded all the conversations between Belinas and himself, many of which the Transhumania News Network replayed live on its website and also shared with media organizations around the world. People felt baffled and betrayed by their governments, asking: Did the world's A10 leaders know about this? Is it legal? Is it morally right? Since the kidnapping and torture compound are clearly criminal and dishonorable, did we ever really know Reverend Belinas? People felt embarrassed for their government and country.

The following morning, in another impromptu televised speech, the U.S. President awkwardly reversed the praise he had poured over Reverend Belinas. He apologized to his country for the kidnapping, insisting that he knew nothing of the preacher's plan nor of the government's secret torture compound in Virginia. He promised a thorough investigation into the matter and into the NFSA, and asked Americans to continue supporting and trusting their government.

It was too late. Many people were now angry and permanently skeptical. The President was caught in a web of lies, and his play of innocence only fueled their lack of faith. Opposing parties in Congress demanded his immediate resignation, citing his inability to run the country properly. Anti-government demonstrations in America's major cities popped up everywhere. Senator Michaelson was also trapped by the public's fury. His leadership of the NFSA was hotly questioned and criticized by the media. Gregory tried to distance himself from the hounding press, holing himself up in his Washington, D.C. house with the blinds shut. He felt lost without Belinas, and his presidential chances were rapidly dwindling.

A10 countries and their politicians also tried to distance themselves from the kidnapping of Jethro Knights—what they publicly called: injudicious American actions. They especially didn't want to be associated in any way with the famous preacher. He was, after all, an obvious Christian fanatic, the foreign leaders insisted. Their countries and religious populace, they promised, were far more moderate. Regardless, all A10 members and their leaders still agreed on the dangers of Transhumania, more so after seeing what their advanced military technology was capable of doing.

The generals, admirals, and military commanders of the A10 countries were even more vexed than politicians, fearing with certainty that Transhumania possessed evolved nuclear weaponry and other mass destructive capabilities. They fretted that the Transhumanians would not hesitate to use such power against the A10. The commanders insisted on beginning their war campaign immediately. It was not prudent, they felt, to give Transhumania any more time to mobilize and develop a strategy.

## Chapter 31

Twenty-four hours after Transhumania rescued Jethro Knights on American soil, the most powerful A10 military leaders were transported by helicopter to the aircraft carrier *USS Freeport*, thirty-five miles off Oahu, Hawaii. The ten haughty figures, all older men bearing myriad medals, emblems, and stars on their uniforms, gathered in the ship's main conference room. After hours of deliberation, the commanders decided their combined navies should surround Transhumania and selectively bombard it with the most sophisticated and accurate surface-to-surface missiles in their arsenals.

The commanders did not want to destroy the entire city nor kill its scientists. Their intent was only to demolish the parts of Transhumania unnecessary to them, such as the wind farm, the stadium, or

even the tallest skyscraper, which contained all housing and administrative offices. Once the bombing was done, the A10 would seize the city, along with all valuable research and inventions in the Science and Technology Towers. Captured scientists would be forced to return to their homelands and be jailed or released on strict probation.

“Nuclear weapons will not be used unless A10 countries are attacked with mass-destruction weaponry,” the American Secretary of Defense promised the press and the public. “We plan to spare as many lives as possible. This is a group of very intelligent people—scientists the world needs—who have been led astray by a devilishly philosophical tyrant.”

Secretly, though, A10 military leaders agreed that if Transhumania put up too formidable a fight, or threatened their navies directly, they would collectively destroy and sink the platform in one massive onslaught. They weren’t going to take any chances with a city full of technological wonders and horrors. Besides, there was always the possibility of a revolutionary new Transhumanian weapon falling exclusively into the hands of one of the A10 countries. Such an incident could have vast ramifications in the geopolitical pecking order; relative global peace and the A10 union could be quickly destabilized. Nobody wanted to take that risk.

Forty-eight hours later, in the heart of the Pacific Ocean along the equator near Fiji, an international armada of warships convened and moved on Transhumania. They encircled the seasteading city, keeping twenty miles off it. F-22 fighter jets were ready to depart from nearby aircraft carriers. American, Chinese, and Russian submarines patrolled close by, underneath the sea. Fully loaded B-2A bomber planes awaited orders to quickly take off from Guam, New Zealand, and the Philippines.

Preston Langmore, Mayor Burton, Josh Genear, Janice Mantikas, Francisco Dante, Oliver Mbaye, and three top Transhumanian military division heads met Jethro Knights in his quarters at the Immortality Bridge. In front of them, on the dining room’s huge glass table, were tons of strategic plans, laptops, and half-drunk coffees. They were deep into a late-night strategy session. In the background, IMN was playing on a television, the volume barely audible. Jethro listened occasionally, chuckling as he watched IMN’s live coverage of the ships gathering outside Transhumania. Oliver and Burton smiled too. Langmore did not find it so amusing.

“They’re so misled. So blind,” Jethro said. “They have about twenty-four hours in a world they call their own. Then it’s ours. Just think of the possibilities.”

“As long as the shield system works,” Langmore pointed out nervously. “It’s not been fully tested.”

“It’s been simulated dozens of times. That’s what engineers call fully tested,” Jethro answered.  
“It’s not the same thing.”

“Preston, when I built my sailboat, I simulated the whole thing in my head. A is A. Our engineers have done the same thing here, except not only in their heads, but also on a hundred supercomputers that approximate a trillion calculations a second. We’re fine. Besides, we have backups of backups. A very sensible philosophy.”

“Our lives and everything we’ve been working and fighting for will be over quickly if you’re wrong.”

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At exactly 8:15 A.M., two hours before the first A10 missiles were launched at the transhuman nation, an American admiral on the battleship *USS Talbot* telephoned Oliver Mbaye at the Transhumania Defense Command Center. He warned him to tell the city’s citizens not to be near the solar farms, wind farms, or the power station, because incoming missiles would soon be destroying

those areas. In a straitlaced tone of voice, the admiral also told Oliver other parts of the city would be spared until further notice. The A10 commanders were counting on a quick surrender once Transhumania's leaders saw its city on fire and its energy sources destroyed.

Oliver politely thanked the admiral for the call, telling him he would inform the people. The recorded phone conversation was forwarded to Jethro Knights, who listened to it from the observation hall on the top floor of the Transhumania Tower. In front of imposing, twenty-foot-high, 360-degree viewing windows, Jethro stood coolly, wearing a wire-thin headset connected to every person in the command center and control rooms of the city. Twelve flat screen monitors, showing radar, video feeds, and other data points, were built into the floor in front of him. Preston Langmore stood next to him on his right. Jethro shook his head in jest when he listened to the formality of the admiral's tone. He emailed the audio message to leaders and staff of Transhumania with a smiley face icon in the subject line. It calmed the air.

An hour later, no one was calm anymore. History and their futures weighed upon them. Jethro began pacing in front of the huge glass windows, like a tiger in a cage. If their defense systems failed, there was little chance for success, and surrender remained the only option. Many military specialists, technology experts, computer technicians, and cyber-warriors at Transhumania had spent years preparing for this moment, and now everyone was jittery while waiting to see the results.

"Incoming. Here we go, ladies and gentlemen," Oliver yelled to his staff.

Twenty miles away, the radar showed four missiles launched from an American warship. They were Tomahawk 338As, the most sophisticated of the A10 arsenal.

Eight seconds later, launched from the roof of the Technology Tower, two missiles shot past the other skyscrapers' windows.

"There they go," shouted a young engineer. All the techies at their computer stations could feel their desks shake.

Everywhere in the city, Transhumania's citizens looked up, nervously watching missiles leave the platform.

"Outbound," Oliver whispered tensely to himself.

It took only seconds before the two Transhumanian missiles were out of sight. All eyes in the command center shot to the dozens of radar, video, and data screens built into the walls around the room.

For half a minute, people on Transhumania waited, some holding their breaths, some staring at each other, some carefully watching the expansive blue in front of them. Finally, just barely visible in the distance through the windows, there was an explosion over the sea. Then another. The Transhumanian missiles had tracked and collided with the American missiles twelve miles off the city.

"Strong work, people," Jethro said quietly into his mouthpiece. Everyone heard him.

There were still two missiles in the air: one headed toward the wind farm, the other toward the power station.

"How are we, Josh?" Oliver asked, wondering what was taking so long. He was under the impression that Josh Genear, the star of computer code on Transhumania, should've already confirmed the Tomahawks were reprogrammed and headed another way.

Oliver repeated, "Taking a while, huh, Josh?"

Two thousand other Transhumanian staff members heard him on their headsets, their hearts beating quicker.

Genear typed intently on his computer, lost in concentration, clicking screens on and off at absurdly fast speeds. He hadn't even noticed Oliver speaking to him.

"T-minus forty seconds until impact," shouted another engineer across the command center, watching lights flash on his supercomputer.

"Any second now," Genear finally whispered, quickly grabbing a sip of an energy drink from the open can on his desk.

Oliver grimaced, looking out to sea.

In the background speaker, from the top of the Transhumania Tower, Langmore was heard exclaiming, "Damn!"

Jethro's rapid reply followed: "Calm down, Preston. Half a minute is left."

Then an animated voice burst out. "Got it!" Genear yelled. "First missile locked and reprogrammed. Bound for sea. There it goes."

Loud sighs of relief were heard in the background on peoples' headsets.

"Hold on. Wait. Okay, confirmed. Second missile hacked and reprogrammed. Bound for sea as well. Done."

The command center erupted with cheers and clapping. People stood up and shook hands.

"Excellent work, people. Both systems look sound and ready," Jethro said, standing adamantly, looking out at the world's most powerful navies.

Jethro Knights switched to another phone line on his headset, and said to his secretary, "Janice, please call the American admiral for me. Click in the Transhumania News Network, IMN, and everyone else who's waiting."

"Sir, one minute. Holding the line."

Jethro looked out to sea. There was violence etched into his face.

"He's on—the U.S. Admiral."

"Thank you, Janice. Admiral, how are you today?"

"Mr. Knights, I don't know how you did that with my Tomahawks. But if you don't surrender immediately, we will put everything at you. Everything we got. And you won't be so lucky next time."

"Admiral, listen to me very carefully. Next time, every missile you send will be redirected at you and your allies' ships and submarines. I urge you to withdraw and go home, or the loss of life in your navies will be staggering."

"How dare you tell me what to do on a live line? We know your tricks, you egomaniac. This is your last chance, Knights. Surrender, or be put under world siege."

Jethro growled in the background, loudly and irately.

"Admiral, we have the technology to obliterate your navy in less than two minutes—you and every single damn vessel out there. I implore you to withdraw today so countless young lives on those ships will be spared."

"Idiot," the admiral shouted into the receiver. "It's you and your floating hive of transgression that's going to lose lives."

The admiral hung up and shouted, "Lieutenant, he directly threatened us. Only God knows what evil weaponry he possesses. Order all ships and submarines to fire at will. Arm and initiate launch sequences. Let's sink that tin can of a city. He's not going to give in a damn inch."

The line went blank. Jethro threw his head back furiously. He knew the admiral's decision was going to cost thousands of lives on those boats. Yet, there was no other way, he thought reluctantly. It had to be done. He needed to show the world—watching on television, listening on the radio, following online—how strong Transhumania was, and how badly the rest of the planet's best were outmatched.

"Janice, make sure the media now have total live feed from all the cameras and microphones on Transhumania."

"Already happening, Jethro."

In the next sixty seconds, the silence was tangible in the command center. Every so often a lone voice shouted out an order, or a colleague asked another to test a program. Some engineers were so nervous that sitting was impossible. They stood in front of their computers, tapping their feet and chewing gum, their arms outstretched to their keyboards.

Finally, Oliver Mbaye's voice rang out, his words rolling quickly. "Here we go. Chinese first up. Looks like eighteen missiles on their way. Now the Russians: twenty-six fired, including four torpedoes from the subs. Americans: forty-four Tomahawks and counting; plus twelve torpedoes.

Soon the radar showed a plethora of missiles and torpedoes shooting towards Transhumania. A young programmer in the command center, watching his computer monitor, looked horrified. His screen highlighted hundreds of red and green heat trails bound for their small silver dot of a nation.

Jethro stared at the video feeds in front of him, beaming images from the supercomputers in the command center. He looked to the empty sky, then at the water below, then back to the screens. Thousands of machines on Transhumania were making billions of computations. Their lives and dreams depended on them all, he thought.

“Josh, make sure each country’s missiles and torpedoes hit different countries’ ships and subs,” Jethro ordered. “Let them dance over *that* one.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, sir.”

Eight miles away from their origination, the first of the rockets began slowly turning away from their Transhumania-bound course, first zigzagging across the sky, then finally heading back to the area of ships from which they came. The fired torpedoes carried out the same slow u-turns in the water. One by one, each weapon that had been launched performed a similar routine. The American admiral on the *USS Talbot*—holding a coffee mug branded with an American flag on it—appeared stunned and confused. His eyebrows narrowed as he stared at the radar in front of him in the command station, then at the bright sky outside.

Finally, the Admiral turned to his crew and ordered, “Press the self-detonate buttons, sailors. Press them now!”

The row of seamen near him tried repeatedly pressing buttons and turning the missile control keys. “It’s not working, sir,” shouted a sailor.

Navy engineers spread throughout the command station also desperately tried to override the Transhumanian hacks. But nothing worked.

“I can’t do anything at all, sir,” the senior navigation missile specialist yelled. “They’ve somehow hacked into the system and have total control.”

When there was only fifteen seconds left before the missiles struck, and ships’ crews began seeing nearby British vessels explode from other redirected rockets, chaos hit the command stations of the A10 armada.

“There they are in the sky,” a petty officer shouted and pointed. He launched out of his chair and abandoned his computer console. He raced downstairs to a platform where he could dive into the sea. Others followed by the hundreds, trampling over each other, desperately squeezing down small stairwells to get outside.

To the armada of A10 ships and submarines, the mix of incoming missiles and torpedoes appeared random. Indian missiles hit Brazilian ships. French missiles hit Saudi Arabian ships. Australian torpedoes hit British submarines. One American Tomahawk missile changed its course and headed towards a Chinese aircraft carrier. When the men on deck saw it coming, they tried to shoot it down with their mounted anti-aircraft guns, but it proved impossible to knock out. Dozens of sailors jumped overboard from the decks right before the missile struck their warship. The Chinese commander got on the phone, screaming at the American admiral in Mandarin Chinese.

On Transhumania, at first there was excitement that their technology was so efficient. Citizens watched the battle on the ocean through the skyscrapers’ windows. Then the view became sobering. Around them in every direction were ominous flashes of lights. Every few seconds, a ship was destroyed or a submarine was sunk. A circle of black smoke appeared around Transhumania, blown by trade winds. A somber mood slowly took over. Everyone knew lives were being lost by the thousands—lives that were not intricately involved with the arrogant decisions of the A10 politicians and commanders.

Transhumanians watched quietly as the sea in the distance continued to occasionally flare up. Even the command center was in the middle of a long moment of silence.

Suddenly, it all changed.

“Red alert, Oliver,” shouted an engineer. “One missile is not responding.”

The mood was instantly broken, and everyone began searching the sky or radar screens for it. A Soviet-era X3 missile from a Russian frigate was unable to be reprogrammed in the air.

“What's up, Josh?” Jethro said calmly, clearing the airwaves.

“We're having serious issues. There's a Russian missile freezing up on us. Left quadrant, 3 P.M. Don't know why.”

“Got it. Do you have an alternative lock with the defense shield rockets?”

“Not a good one. We're very late to the game. Only twenty-six seconds left before impact.”

“Double or triple up on it,” Oliver said.

“Already done, sir.”

Instantly, everybody realized the interceptor rockets might not be able to track and collide with the rogue missile before it struck the city. There just wasn't enough time left to get a proper lock on its course.

“Are you sure you can't reprogram the Russian missile?” Oliver asked.

“Cannot. The computers say its unreadable code. Interceptors are our only hope.”

“Where is it going to hit?” Jethro asked.

“Near the top of your tower, sir—almost exactly where you are in the observation hall.”

“It could bring the building down, Jethro. Get out of there,” shouted Oliver.

“It's too late,” answered Jethro.

Another engineer yelled, “First collider rocket is off and being programmed in the air. You should see it any moment in your east. Not sure if we're too late. We'll know in twelve seconds.”

“Got the visual,” Jethro confirmed.

Bypassing their sense of security, some people in the city pressed closer to windows to watch the outcome. Less than a half mile off, the first interceptor missile missed the Russian rocket.

“Damn—first one wasn't even close,” moaned an engineer from the command center.

“Second collider rocket off.”

A quarter mile from Transhumania, the second interceptor missile also missed and shot lamely into the sky. Gasps were heard on all intercoms.

“Everyone in Transhumania Tower, pull away from the windows and get into your bathtubs or under a desk,” Jethro roared into his headset, sprinting for Langmore. He skidded into the old man and jerked him down onto the ground in one agile movement.

“Third and final collider rocket off,” shouted an engineer.

Jethro and Langmore both looked up, scanning the sky to see if their last missile would make the intercept.

With four seconds left before the Russian X3 landed a direct hit on the city's most populated tower, the final interceptor missile shot past the skyscrapers. The collider rocket veered hard left, then right, then left again, a supercomputer controlling its every millimeter of flight. People held their breaths. There were just moments left before devastation; thousands of lives and the potential collapse of their tallest skyscraper were at stake.

In the last tenth of a second, the interceptor veered hard right precisely 11.2895 degrees and nicked the tail of the Russian missile, causing a stream of smoke, then fire, from its jet propulsion. The missile began swirling in the air uncontrollably, like a deflating balloon gone wild. Even though it couldn't fly straight, it appeared the rocket was still going to hit the Transhumania Tower. A moment later the missile's fuselage caught fire, causing it to detonate twenty meters from the building.

The explosion was humongous. It shot a massive blast of air and fire into the skyscraper, causing its thick glass siding to bend in a wave. A moment later, ten stories of windows shattered from the rocket's shooting debris. The observation hall that Jethro and Langmore were in shook violently. Bolts tore out of the floor near them. The building's steel ribs flexed. Glass scattered everywhere. Citizens across Transhumania felt the city shake and the platform sway from the impact, as if hit by a giant

ocean swell.

The lead engineer shouted into his headset, "Sir, are you okay? Mr. Knights, are you okay?"

In the background, on the speaker, only static was heard—and the ominous noise of multiple fire alarms sounding. People from the other towers rushed to their windows, not sure what they would see left of the Transhumania Tower. Their first glimpse was of smoke fuming out through the observation bridge at the top of the building.

"Sir, are you okay?" Oliver Mbaye asked.

Jethro felt the ocean air from eighty stories down rush through his hair, cool and smoky. He looked at Preston, aged and petrified, but safely protected in his arms.

Finally, a voice everyone knew crackled through. "Yes, we're okay. Preston and I are okay." Jethro coughed from the smoke, then asked, "Janice, are you okay? Everyone else?"

Slowly, everyone chimed in and announced they were safe.

"Oliver, where are we? Don't retaliate unless fired upon again," Jethro said.

"I think they're done, Jethro. No more missiles or torpedoes have been fired, and every ship and submarine out there is damaged. Most are sinking and headed for the bottom of the ocean."

"What about airstrikes from the jets on the aircraft carriers? Or from bombers?"

"Nothing right now. Carriers and their planes are all sinking. I don't think they planned much for *that* type of attack. The big-headed American admiral didn't think they needed to."

"Okay, but keep a close eye on the sky for a thousand-mile radius."

"The shield system is being fully armed again and ready to defend."

"Good."

"Shall we initiate rescue operations for survivors now?"

"Of course. Get it going," Jethro said, coughing. "I'm going to the roof with Preston where there's less smoke. Get a fire crew up here immediately. Mostly, it's just the drapes that are alight. I haven't seen any serious structural damage yet."

Jethro roped his arm around Langmore and assisted him up the fire stairs. On the roof, he seated his friend and let him breathe in the fresh air. Then Jethro walked to the corner of the building, trying to be still for a moment, forcing himself to hold his patience together. Breaking the apprehensive silence of 500 software engineers and programmers closely listening, he said, "Okay, Josh—what the hell happened?"

"Right. Knew that was coming," Josh answered, fidgeting in his seat and adjusting his spectacles. "We're working on what went wrong. This is going to sound crazy, but I think that specific Russian missile was so old, it tricked the reprogramming software. We didn't anticipate their use of a DOS guidance system from the Cold War era. Honestly, I wasn't even born yet when that type of code was in use."

Jethro couldn't help but smile for an instant.

"Fine. Make a note and adjust the programs. Use everyone available. I want a fix in twenty-four hours. I want every conceivable code ever written, regardless of how simple or obsolete, covered by our systems. We can't allow a weakness like that to occur again."

"We're on it. Doesn't look like we'll be sleeping tonight."

Jethro shook his head in comic disbelief, then walked towards another section of the roof to watch the burning ocean far off in the distance. Already, Transhumanian boats were speeding through the water to round up survivors and ship them to the nearest island group, Fiji, which was 200 miles away.

Later, Jethro and Langmore went downstairs to some of the other damaged areas and began helping people clean out debris and glass. Mostly, the damage was superficial and construction crews could repair everything in a few days.

Just after noon, Jethro pulled out his cell phone and sent a mass text and email to every transhumanist in the city:

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

*Today, Transhumania has won its first military encounter with the outside world, and the first stage of our greater transhuman mission. Congratulations to all of you who helped save and support Transhumania. Congratulations to all who remained here to pursue transhumanism—and to defend our lives and dreams. Your courage and loyalty are invaluable. Over the next forty-eight hours, we'll be delivering more updates on any new or urgent Transhumanian developments. For now, it's safe to return to your offices and get back to work. Good luck with your research and experiments—and with your preparation to go back out into the world as its new leaders.*

*Jethro Knights*

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Later that afternoon, Jethro Knights walked into the Transhumania News Network television studio on the forty-sixth floor of the tallest tower. Anxiously awaiting him were renowned international journalists and videographers who were allowed to be embedded into the city to cover the battle. Many were tense and disheveled, the result of the missile explosion a few hours before. Some of the nearby windows were cracked. Jethro walked up to the podium in the studio and adjusted the microphone. He was about to begin his scheduled five-minute telecast, being fed live all over the world through IMN and other major broadcasters who were present to air it. Draped behind him was a large Transhumanian flag, which bore the TEF infinity symbol on it.

Jethro looked into the cameras and nodded firmly. He said, “People of the world, thank you for watching and listening today. My name is Jethro Knights. I am the founder and leader of Transhumania—a nation of scientists, technologists, and futurists dedicated to transhumanism and the pursuit of our own immortality. We are sworn transhumanists.”

He inhaled a deep breath.

“Today you have seen the world’s most powerful countries and their governments attack the nation of Transhumania with the best of their military might, despite our plea that they should not do so, and that they do so at the expense of their own safety. We openly gave your governments a chance to surrender, to peacefully accept our leadership, and to convert to our transhuman ways. Many of you have heard it yourselves in the news when I was at the United Nations in New York three days ago. Your governments chose not to accept that offer. They thought it better to arrest me, abduct me, wound me, and torture me until I would agree to share the benefits of Transhumania’s amazing technology and research with them. My nation and I will not share it with them.

“We will, however, share it with you. But only under conditions that Transhumania decrees. Today, you have seen how feeble your governments and their military forces are in the face of the armed prowess Transhumania possesses. Today we have suffered no casualties or serious damage. Your military forces, on the other hand, have suffered many deaths and the loss of much of their navies. And, in doing so, they have done nothing but further anger a giant.

“Now carefully listen to my words, then decide who you want to support from this moment forward. Because there is a choice to be made. The choice is either to stand by your arrogant, fool leaders and their mediocre conventionality and traditionalism, or to join in the launch of a brave new world. One where Transhumania will send out its inspiring leaders and scientists amongst you. One where we will revive your economies with our research, with our technologies, with our rational economic decisions, with our medical cures, with our inventions, with our sane laws, and with our

resolute guidance. We want our scientists to return to their homelands to remake the way we all live on Earth. In time, you can expect a much better life. You can expect your cultures to progress forward; your restrictive religions to be diminished; your ignorance to be turned into intellect; your apathy into determination; your pessimism into optimism; your frustration into fulfillment; your hardship into prosperity.

“Like you, your governments were given a choice to support a quest of the transhuman mission. Unfortunately, they did not want to listen to reason or to the calling of evolution. They chose to fight us instead. They chose wrongly. They will not be invited back. Tonight, I swear to you, they will witness Transhumania's full fury. Tonight, they will see all their illustrious political edifices and sacred religious monuments destroyed. The world will wake up tomorrow and be a part of Transhumania.

“When the choice comes to you personally, of whose side you support, think deeply and logically about making the right decision. Your future and prosperity—your children's future and prosperity—depend on it. I have told you once during the inaugural announcement of Transhumania that you are all dispensable. I ask you tonight to prove that wrong. Tomorrow, when our destructive work is possibly finished, I will again appear on television, radio, and throughout the Internet, and formally invite you to join Transhumania; to form a world where prosperity, innovation, happiness, fulfillment, freedom, security, and transhumanism go hand in hand.

“For the next twelve hours, we have instructed the media what world sites and institutions will be destroyed by our airships, and at exactly what time. The media will broadcast the list of sites often. You are encouraged to stay away from those areas being targeted so you do not become collateral damage. You are also encouraged to warn your families, friends, and peers to stay away.”

Jethro looked unflinchingly into the camera and said, “Transhumania will now begin the launch of its four aircraft—and the remaking of the world's human cultural landscape. Let the abominations of irrationality, control by religion, encouragement of fear, ineptitude by government, collectivism over individuality, and the war against transhumanism, all be wiped away.”

## Chapter 32

At the top of the Technology Tower, a gargantuan stainless steel roof was composed of four interlocking triangles; they slowly began to withdraw from one another. The noses of four shining airships appeared, growing in length under the roof's shadow as it retracted. Each machine bore an inscribed Lojban name in small black letters on its starboard wing: *Trano*, *Cidro*, *Kijno*, and *Tabno*. The names represented the four elements that gave rise to advanced life on Planet Earth: *Trano* for nitrogen; *Cidro* for hydrogen; *Kijno* for oxygen; *Tabno* for carbon.

Each of the drones was unmanned. All control and maneuvering of the mission was to be performed automatically by supercomputers located in the Transhumania Defense Command Center. Without any transparent cockpit windows, the aircraft appeared menacing, cold, impervious.

Simultaneously, each of the planes' Hyper-scram jets activated, creating concentrated beams of light that shot thousand-degree heat onto the skyscraper's dense titanium floor. The city of Transhumania, basking in a violent sunset that consumed the Pacific Ocean, vibrated softly. Citizens looked up and watched the iridescent skies above them. Moments later, the aircraft began hovering a few feet off the roof. Then, in perfect synchronization, they broke away from each other and flew in different directions: *Trano*, west; *Cidro*, east; *Kijno*, south; and *Tabno*, north.

On each of the airships' noses, a sophisticated night vision video camera and a weatherproof boom microphone were slightly visible. The drones would record every second of their entire missions. The footage would be broadcast live by the Transhumania News Network and shared with every major news platform on the globe. Across all continents, people watched tensely, gathering around television

sets in bars and cafes. Or listening to radios in their homes and vehicles. Or viewing the footage from wherever they happened to be, via their phones, computers, and tablets. Jethro Knights wanted the missions of the aircraft to be the most viewed and recognized event in the history of the planet.

Francisco Dante, the city's lead news correspondent, arrived at the Transhumania Tower's broadcast studio and immediately sat down in the anchor's chair. He threw off his formal black jacket and rolled up his sleeves. Excitement poured through him. Dante knew he would be reporting live all night, in front of three dozen cameras with tentacles reaching to every population center on the planet.

"Viewers, if you are just joining me tonight—*welcome*," he said. "I am Francisco Dante, a citizen of Transhumania, and proud to say history will be made here in the next twelve hours upon our dear planet. Tomorrow, all of us will wake up to a new day—and a new world. My news team and I, here in the Transhumania Tower, will be giving you updates and bringing you important information as it occurs, once our four airships get underway on their missions. On our affiliate channels and with our partners, the news will be teleprompted into your regional languages."

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After Jethro Knight's speech and his declaration to transform the whole world into a greater Transhumania, the launching of a nuclear attack against the city was unanimously agreed upon by A10 leaders and its military commanders. Each country with nuclear arms began fueling their most sophisticated missiles. Some A10 countries also loaded their largest bomber aircraft with airdrop nuclear weapons designed to explode upon impact. These planes could accurately drop bombs on any target from 20,000 feet in the sky, and still fly safely without the use of any electrical instruments. A10 governments were now overtly worried that Transhumania possessed the ability to hack into every computerized navigation system in their military arsenal.

When satellite photos taken by the Transhumania Command Defense Center revealed how the A10 governments were planning to attack the floating city, Jethro Knights quickly initiated an international conference call. He requested top dignitaries and leaders from each A10 country to carefully listen in. He warned them that if any nuclear weapons were directed at Transhumania, they would be redelivered to attack and decimate the capitals of the countries from which they came.

"You witnessed once what happened when you attacked our nation," Jethro said on the phone, unwaveringly. "The best of your navies are literally gone. We can, and will, annihilate you if we must. I implore you not to make the ignorant decision to underestimate us again. You are encouraged to surrender, or if you will, to give me the cooperation I sought at the United Nations in New York, a few days ago. Now that you haven't, you won't even have your revered political buildings, castles, and churches to make into museums."

"You will, however, be given another chance after tonight to save many of your lives, your prosperity, and the infrastructure of your societies. I encourage you to remain reasonable and take a wait-and-see approach before committing your countries and its citizens to the void."

"Unfortunately, since I know many of you are not reasonable, I feel compelled to make an acute display of Transhumania's military strength in order to preempt any nuclear strikes and to avoid further loss of human life. Therefore, in the next ten minutes, I'm going to turn your worlds upside down. Why don't we all schedule another conference call in a half hour."

Jethro hung up. Immediately afterward, he instructed Josh Genear and his team to reprogram various A10 nuclear missiles near Washington, D.C., Beijing, London, Paris, Delhi, Tel Aviv, and Moscow. He ordered the same for select nuclear submarines cruising the oceans. In less than five minutes, Genear and his programmers recoded the warheads' supposedly fool-proof detonation timers. Other members of his team corrupted the rockets' navigation systems, rendering the missiles

impossible to launch or fly. Genear then initiated three-minute detonation countdowns, threatening to explode multiple nuclear warheads around the world at the same time, right inside their own launching silos, some of which were only ten miles from major urban centers.

Chaos ensued on nuclear weapons bases and submarines. Many personnel at the land bases panicked and left their posts, jumping into their cars, and driving as fast as they could away from the warheads. Trapped crews in submarines watched in disbelief as warhead timers autonomously counted down. Senior engineers, captains, and generals made screaming telephone calls to the leaders of their nations, begging for orders and guidance. A10 presidents and prime ministers stared at the receivers of their phones, aghast and terrified. The strongest military around the world were left in utter instability and fear, their greatest weapons turned against them.

Before the detonation countdowns reached zero, Jethro asked Genear to stop each of the explosions, leaving the timers armed and frozen with only three seconds remaining on each bomb.

A half hour later, in a second conference call with all top A10 leaders nervously listening, Jethro sharply told the politicians, "Let that be a clear lesson to your generals and warmongering selves. You have lost the war. It's time for you to fold and offer your assistance in helping to make this transition as peaceful and expedient as possible. We have you beat in every way."

Despite this, in a last ditch effort to preserve the world as the A10 knew it, a reckless, hotheaded American general, on an aircraft carrier in San Diego, sent his best F-22 fighter jets to meet one of the Transhumanian drones, *Trano*, as it flew across California. The U.S. pilots were ordered to fly and fight using only manual controls, so that none of their planes' electronics could be interfered with or hacked into.

Jethro didn't bother to destroy the American planes. Even if the pilots were lucky enough to get off a few decent shots, the probability of their missiles or bullets ever touching *Trano* was nearly zero. The aircraft traveled three times faster than anything that could be shot at it.

The American general, tracking *Trano* on radar from San Diego, muttered, "It can't be possible. It looks like a damn meteorite flying across the sky."

"It might as well be," acknowledged a radar engineer nearby. The man's radar screen showed *Trano* encountering and flying right past eight F-22 fighters near the Santa Monica Mountains. The Transhumanian plane was in and out of sight of the American jets within five seconds. There was nothing anyone could do. It was too quick a moment for the U.S. squadron leader to even yell out a reasonable command.

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*Tabno* was the first aircraft to reach a major structure scheduled to be destroyed: the Royal Palace in Tokyo. A single Transhumanian-designed Tetronic T-1 missile was launched from the underside of the aircraft. Japanese citizens could hardly see the drone stream across the sky before the palace was obliterated by the rocket. In an instant, a huge light-bearing devastating scatter-bomb technology—incinerated its target. Nothing was left but an enormous scar upon the land with small burning fires.

The second aircraft, *Cidro*, approached India's Parliament building. In less than ten seconds, another T-1 missile demolished an area the size of four football fields of concrete and brick, along with hundreds of historical treasures accumulated over centuries by the British and Indian governments. Jethro Knights warned nations ahead of time that he was not an archaeologist, but a futurist. And relics of the past bore little value to him.

*Trano* reached America's East Coast early in its evening and sent missiles to destroy the White House, the Capitol building, and the Supreme Court. Centuries of legacy and past triumph were annihilated by three fiery explosions, gargantuan in scope, as they engulfed Washington, D.C.'s

governmental district. The nearby NFSA headquarters was also blasted into ruins. Astonished viewers from downtown hotels and offices stared through windows, observing the carnage where the nation's vital structures once stood. In the dark, the city went into a panic. People began leaving for the countryside by the hundreds of thousands, many on foot and bicycle to avoid the standstill of car traffic.

On television and radio, Francisco Dante urged people to remain calm, return to their homes, and await further instructions. He told Americans no more bombing was scheduled in Washington, D.C. Under recommendation from Jethro Knights, he also advised police and military guards to shoot looters and agitators on sight.

*Kijno* reached Europe early in the continent's morning. Its first missile was due to eradicate the Vatican at 8:20 A.M., local time. Catholic believers by the hundreds remained in the famous Saint Peter's Square, praying on their knees for a miracle. They were repeatedly warned by police and the media to depart the area. Along with the Pope, who was hiding below ground in the catacombs, all were incinerated by the single missile, which leveled a half kilometer square of the historical city, leaving nothing but a smoldering twenty-foot-deep crater.

*Cidro* soon crossed to Mecca, where the Kabba was obliterated. It continued to Jerusalem, where the Wailing Wall and Temple Mount were demolished; then to the Djennia, West Africa, to wreck the Grand Mosque. In England, *Kijno* destroyed the Parliament structure and Buckingham Palace, then continued on to raze Versailles and Notre Dame in France, ending with the European Union headquarters in Brussels. In North America, *Trano* brought down Canada's Congressional Palace in Toronto, then the United Nations building in New York City. It continued until it reached South America, where it collapsed Brazil's thirteen-story Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro, and later, Argentina's National Congress building in Buenos Aires. In China, *Tabno* demolished the Imperial Palace, then the Kremlin in Russia. Another raid in Australia reduced the Commonwealth Parliament building to rubble.

The aircraft continued for hours, wreaking destruction upon the Earth. No populated continent was spared. No timeless religious monument left unscathed. No famous government building left standing. When many of the world's most revered institutions stood in ruins, Jethro Knights implemented the next phase of his plan to put the world in an informational darkroom. Josh Genear and his team hacked into hundreds of the most powerful land-based communication towers and Earth-orbiting satellites. Once they had control of them, they recoded all the software programming so that only Transhumania could manage the world's media and Internet traffic, nearly all of which relied on digitally induced airwaves. Over the next few hours, usually only for fifteen minutes at a time, Genear tormented A10 countries by putting them offline, then online, then offline again. He repeated the process numerous times. The A10 military and police went into total disarray.

Next, the Transhumanian team hacked into traffic light systems, power grids, aviation control towers, and key banks of major world capitals. City traffic in London, Beijing, and Johannesburg went berserk. Bangkok, Dubai, and Mexico City became completely pitch-dark at night. Thousands of planes in flight made emergency landings in remote airports and crop fields, as their autopilots, digital gauges, and GPS guidance systems malfunctioned. Bank deposits, loan notes, and equity accounts were zeroed out; trillions of dollars vanished in seconds.

The world watched, shocked, as if in a horror movie. Many of its most valuable symbols, possessions, and twenty-first century privileges were destroyed. Many of its most basic functions and expectations were no longer guaranteed. People ran to their kitchen sinks, grateful that water still came out of the faucets when turned on.

The full moon was high in Transhumania when the four drones returned, unscratched, ready for refueling and carrying out more destruction. Jethro possessed enough missiles and fuel in his city for another fifty flight missions. His military readied the aircraft for more departures. His next targets were the planet's core infrastructure: mega-dams, nuclear power plants, agriculture silos, major bridges, oil

tankers, water reservoirs, busy freeway overpasses, international airports, and commercial harbors. Enough to send the world's progress back nearly a hundred years. Jethro told Francisco Dante to report on the potential of the next wave of attacks—and dozens more like it—and what it would mean to the majority of civilization.

People were horrified.

## Chapter 33

During the ravaged world's following hours, as the sun inevitably arched over every nation, mobs of people emerged from hiding to discover the smoldering ruins where their sacred institutions had once stood. The places and symbols humans had cherished their whole lives were now destroyed. Shock and hysteria were ubiquitous.

For the most part, the Internet still didn't work, and phone calls were almost impossible to get through. Power blackouts were common. Lines at gas stations were sometimes a mile long. People waited in traffic for hours, trying to exit cities. No one knew what to do except gather cans of food, fill canisters with water, and prepare for a long, intense ordeal. Police and domestic military troops set up checkpoints on major street corners and roads, urging calm. Rumors spread that another global raid by the four drones was imminent.

On the command of Jethro Knights, Transhumania discontinued its intimidation and menace. The blackouts around the planet stopped. Electricity returned to power grids. Communication servers rebooted themselves. Satellite and phone systems quickly went back online. GPS and air navigation systems began to function. Nations regained control of their utilities.

Fresh news filtered through the media, instructing people to remain at home or to quickly find suitable shelter and to wait for more information. Francisco Dante announced that Jethro Knights would make a speech to the world in exactly two hours. Superimposed at the bottom of Dante's broadcast was the transcribed message: *Leadership of Transhumania to address the future of Earth.* Alongside the message was a 120-minute timer, counting downward.

Billions of people quickly found an outlet to listen to the speech. They waited anxiously, huddling together very still, their ears and eyes tuned to a single object in front of them. A butcher and his family sat cross-legged in Lahore, Pakistan, watching a rusty black-and-white television on a dirt floor. A commercial fisherman and his crew listened to a ham radio on a storm-engulfed ship near the southern tip of Australia. An obese American billionaire philanthropist, whose long-deceased grandfather had earned the family fortune years before, watched a 90-inch flat-screen TV from a king bed. A priest, leaning against the altar in a stone Paraguayan church, listened to a transistor radio. A group of teenagers in Beijing huddled around a cell phone, staring at the device's tiny screen.

When two hours had elapsed, Dante solemnly announced, "Ladies and gentleman, the historical moment has finally arrived. The founder and leader of Transhumania will now officially address the world—and the prospects for our future civilization. I present to you: Jethro Knights."

The image switched to the transhumanist. He was standing unceremoniously in jeans and a plain white T-shirt, leaning against a guardrail at the viewing platform of Transhumania's Memorial Vista. In front of him was a throng of journalists and their video cameras. Behind him lay the entire city and its three lit-up skyscrapers. Dawn was breaking, casting resplendent lights across the obscured clouds, the gray-blue ocean, and the towers. Transhumania was slowly motoring towards the Hudson River of New York City, its new home.

Jethro's face bore the proud weathered look of a prodigious being. He wore no television makeup, did not shave the night before, and had no tie around his neck. There were no artificial camera lights beaming on the man to make him seem younger or falsely attractive. There was no teleprompter in

front of him so that he could read words written by somebody else. His face and wintry blue eyes were austere, aesthetic, almost ugly in their pristine naturalness.

It was his voice, however, that left the greatest impression on people. In its tone there was no mercy, no weakness, and no hesitation—just commitment, exaltation, and unyielding hope in the face of turbulent challenge.

“People of Earth, yesterday I spoke of a choice each of you must make. Today that choice has arrived.

“Your governments have engaged in a war with Transhumania, and they have lost. As a result of that war, you have witnessed a glimpse of the hardship, chaos, pain, and destruction my nation can instill in your lives. The burning piles of your sacred symbols and edifices all around the world are proof of it.

“Transhumania will not allow your governments to continue. Your top leaders are all to be replaced. New leaders from Transhumania will fill the role to govern and lead. A new constitution based on the goals, philosophies, and responsibilities of transhumanism will replace your laws. A new society based on transhumanism will replace your own. If you decide to fight and deny our power over you, then my nation will strip all your resources and riches from you, and put you and your cities back into the Dark Ages.

“However, do not fret or be vexed. This transition can be agonizing and cost all you possess—or it can be trouble-free and quickly finished, leaving you with the chance to reap a bountiful future reward. By losing the war and undergoing this great ordeal, you have gained a chance to remake your world, with Transhumania at the lead. Together we can rebuild your countries, rebuild your economies, rebuild your societies, rebuild your wealth, rebuild your values, and rebuild your lives. We will make it so the fruits of Transhumania can all be harvested together. We will openly share with you our amazing science, medicine, technology, innovation, and inventions, as well as our inspiring philosophies and unfaltering leadership. We can start a better, more promising world together immediately. Your new lives can start today. You can remain free, raise your families, pursue happiness, live healthily, accumulate wealth, gain access to education, work towards personal improvement—and, most importantly, strive to fulfill the goals of transhumanism.

“Because my people and I still see value in you, we believe you should be given the opportunity to completely be integrated amongst us, and to contribute to the shaping of transhuman life on this planet and beyond. We believe you can become the next and most effective generation of transhumanists. But in order to join us, you must first make a choice. The choice comes to you in the form of a wager: the Transhumanist Wager. The wager and quintessential motto of the transhuman movement states that if you love life, you will safeguard that life, and strive to extend and improve it for as long as possible. Anything else you do while alive, any other opinion you have, any other choice you make to not safeguard, extend, and improve that life, is a betrayal of that life. It is a betrayal of the wager. It is a betrayal of the possible potential of your brain. It is a betrayal of the essence of transhumanism. It is a betrayal of Transhumania and its philosophy, Teleological Egocentric Functionalism.

“This is a historic choice that each man and woman on the planet must make. The choice shall determine the rest of your life and the course of civilization.

“Until this choice arrived to you today, each one of you was inevitably going to die. No matter how much you wished otherwise, at some point in the future your flesh was going to rot; your bones were going to become dust; your thoughts were going disintegrate into arbitrary subatomic particles. All your future dreams would disappear as unfulfilled wishes. Every iota of your spirit would vanish into unconscious blankness. Until this choice arrived to you today, your death would be your final achievement—the ultimate statement of your life. That is all you are and could ever hope to be. Nothing more.

“You may vehemently disagree. You may believe that some all-powerful god will resurrect you; that some divine force will reincarnate you; or that your soul will miraculously merge into some super-

mystic consciousness. You may pretend any damn thing you want, but your pretending cannot, and will not, change the nature of life and objective reality around you. The stark truth has always been right before your eyes—that nothing will save you from death. The obviousness of this overwhelms us every time we see a loved one or a friend whose body is lifeless, never to reach out, touch, and communicate with us again. Death is final. So final, that our entire civilization's understanding of it was has always been that death is inevitable, that death is natural, that ultimately, death is destiny.

“I have come here today to tell you something of vast universal implication, something that brings a glorious new promise to our species: Death is not destiny. Death is neither inevitable nor natural. I don’t tell you this as some starry-eyed religious preacher looking for followers; or some crooked political statesman trying to get elected; or some greedy business executive trying to make money off you. I tell it to you as a rational, scientific-minded human being—a fellow sojourner along the path of life. I tell it to you as a man who has witnessed what 10,000 of the smartest minds on the planet have done with human biological death in a mere seven years of working to conquer it. I also tell it to you as a man knowing what a few billion people could do working to overcome it.

“Human death means many different things to many different people: a permanent cessation of consciousness; a chemical decomposition of organized matter; a spiritual passage of the supposed soul to an afterlife. Transhumanists have a unique definition: Death is a malfunction of the human experience. It’s a reversible error, a transitory cloak of emptiness, a curable disease—a highly curable disease if dealt with properly. I’m here today, speaking to billions of you, because Transhumania and its citizens have banded together with resolve against our intolerable biological mortality. We are now here to deal with human death properly, as a disease that can be cured and also eradicated.

“The Transhumanist Wager is the inevitable result of an advancing scientific civilization. Through our choosing, we have brought this wager—this choice—directly to you. We have generously laid it at your feet, for each and every one of you, from the highest to the lowliest, to ponder and act upon. The choice we offer is simple: Die or join us. To die is to continue in your meager ways, your lackluster philosophies, and your futile material successes, with nothing but gravestones and Internet obituaries to memorialize you at the end of your lives. To join us is to begin the greatest adventure and leap of progress our species has ever known—a chance to harness and participate in the pulse of eternity. You can help us challenge the very nature and propensities of the universe. You can drive forward the engine of evolution and maneuver it in favor of every man, woman, and child on the planet.

“On the surface, the choice you should make is obvious; however, most of you are skeptical, cynical, and critical, if not downright opposed. No matter; in time, I believe many of you will see the rationality of joining and supporting the mission of transhumanism. I believe a transformation in your minds and attitudes will come to pass. The overwhelming magnitude and brilliance of the life and the philosophical paradigm shift we are offering will sway your opinions. The sheer possibility of a bright future will turn you towards us. You will be, after all, joining a newly kindled planet that is promising a greater future for all involved. The undeniable logic and value of the offer will overcome your fears, reservations, and biases.

“My Transhumanian colleagues and I openly invite you to join and support us, to become a part of us. A part of a brave new future with the human species seeking transhuman advancement in every way. But in order to be a part of us, you must change. You must radically change, and literally become like us. Most importantly, to do this you must change the way you think. This is no small endeavor. To fundamentally change your thought processes and perceptions of the world, you must undergo a massive evolution of your values.

“The way one thinks about values, and how one determines their personal worth and place in existence, is everything. If one does it wrong, irrationally, and foolishly, then everything in one’s life is wrong, irrational, and foolish. That is why you must now totally change your erroneous thoughts and methodologies. You must change the cultural, religious, patriotic, consumerist, and moralistic indoctrination you’ve been force-fed your whole life. You must change the outdated biological

propensities of yourself if they offer no value. They are obstacles for those of us who want to overturn death's grip and our species' biological fragility. They are cumbersome chains of deception and falsity. They are barriers for your pursuit of the best in yourself and the possibility of your infinite life. They hold you back. And if you become a part of us, they will hold us all back and squander our precious time to accomplish our goals on Earth.

"Yet, before a true evolution of values occurs, each of you must ask yourself a critical question: Why do I want to avoid death? The answer is simple: because you love life. Even in your darkest psychological despair, or your deepest religious brainwashing, or your most exhausting hardship, or your worst catastrophic horror, the thing we call life is miraculous. It's an undeniable gift in a universe of trillions and trillions of light years of empty space, unconscious energy, abounding mass, and quantum potential. All of us stand in awe of the incredible specter of events that has landed us here on Planet Earth. A nearly infinite amount of calculations, effects, and happenings must've occurred so that each of us could be here today as a living, thinking, consciously aware human being with the power to change and exploit the universe. A similar amount of happenings must've occurred so that your family, your friends, your neighbors, and your fellow human beings also appeared. The awe of the universe and the life it has brought to each of us is extraordinary. I declare to you today that if Transhumanians should be known for one thing above all else, it should be our deep love, respect, and appreciation of the miracle of our lives in this universe. We are a people desperately in love with life.

"I believe that similar thoughts and feelings of a love of life, as well as a desire for immortality, lie within each one of you. I believe that the core of our genes is imbued with these concepts, and that the overpowering urge to survive is our deepest, most elemental impulse. Survival is synonymous with a desire to live and an overall love of life. If you are alive, then you are more in love with life than not; otherwise, surely you would have ended your lives by now. Yet, who amongst you, who is sane, would willingly die if they could avoid it? Life for humans is not a choice, but a prerequisite of existence. The choice comes afterward. The choice is the Transhumanist Wager—the right to stand up and fight for the life you love, and to preserve it. Humans are natural fighters. We are also natural gamblers. And it has been taught throughout history that the greatest value you could stake is your own life. There is a far greater stake possible to each one of you right now: to keep that life. To keep it forever. To believe it's your right to keep that life forever. To desperately desire to keep it, and make it as strong and successful as possible. To fight for it as Transhumania has fought for it.

"Yet, absurdly, billions of you have never acted that way. Billions of you have never even asked basic transhuman questions: Why must I die if I don't want to? Why must I have such an imperfect and disease-prone body? Why must I be a meek, transient visitor in this magnificent universe, and not an interminable master of it as I would prefer?

"There are simple answers to these quintessential transhuman questions. From the day you were born until this moment, two things have been hounding you, blinding you, and holding you back. The first is the human race's defunct culture. The second is our species' handicapping mammalian biological instincts.

"Human culture is the most debilitating of the two. For many thousands of years now, the human race has been indoctrinated to submit to orthodoxy and to cower before authority, and to swallow endless nonsense from both. You have been brainwashed to sacrifice your innermost desires, your most obvious needs, your most natural outlook on reality, just to live as a hostage in a cage of carefully regulated and fabricated cognitive existence. Virtually everyone and everything—your countries, customs, faiths, leaders, relatives, friends, lifestyles, even your own memories—have been manipulating and pressuring you to shun fresh, unconventional thoughts. Especially transhuman-oriented thoughts. There has been a pervasive worldwide moratorium on thinking about what the human being is capable of and its possible evolutionary advancement in terms that make a substantial difference in reality.

"Why has this happened? To transhumanists, the reason is obvious: You—the people of the

world—have allowed it to happen. Each of you is guilty for not heeding a higher calling: a more logical, more ambitious, more sublime direction for your life, and a journey to your best self. Your great flaw is the mistaken way in which you choose to interpret existence; your subscription and obedience to the cultural constructs that government, organized religion, ethnic heritage, mega-corporations, and mass media have built around, and within, nearly every thought and action you make. Their web of indoctrination has wholly swamped your lives. Sadly, most of you don't even know this has happened. Most of you are living on this planet in utter delusion, conforming to a largely manufactured and forced reality.

“Throughout your lives and modern history, civilization has erroneously subscribed to the vision that the human being is a marvelous, ingeniously assembled specimen of life: a work of divine creation and sweeping beauty, whose culture and intellect is profound like the cosmos itself. What a joke. The cruel truth is we are a frail, hacked-together organism living within a global culture of irrationality, pettiness, and deception. The specific reason our existing human culture is so malformed is that, throughout history, past cultural constructs of more primitive societies were not discarded as they became irrelevant or outdated. To survive, it was not evolutionarily required to rid ourselves of unnecessary idiosyncrasies and practiced customs—such as nonsensical superstitions, masochistic religiosity, and shackling morality—even though they were foolish to uphold. As a result, damaging, wasteful, and useless behavioral patterns were passed on both socially and individually from generation to generation.

“So now, modern humans are a weighed-down species, burdened by cumbersome past rubbish that's mostly crudely stacked, obsolete cultural constructs through which our minds perceive reality. On Transhumania we have a specific term for this: *baggage culture*. And it's caused nearly all human life to be degenerate and apathetic compared to what it could be. Our species' mindset and powers of perception are currently too lumbering and unfit for what a sophisticated, nimble entity really needs of itself. Our lives are cursed because of the polluted cultural prism our thoughts must exist within and communicate through. In Sisyphean tragedy, we are doomed to grovel, to falter, to repeat our same pathetic mistakes, day after day, year after year, century after century. We need to transition from our defective culture into a new one that directly confronts these issues and sets our minds and transhuman possibilities free.

“The twisted history of our baggage culture extends back many millennia. It started long ago with the inception of civilization, when charismatic leaders and ruling clans began forming permanent communities. Over time, these rulers learned they could preserve their platforms of power by controlling their communities' thinking and behavioral patterns. Their agendas were simple: dominate with fear through violence; stifle revolutionary and freethinking ambitions; teach adherence to leadership and community before self; implement forms of thought and behavioral control that encourage social cooperation and production, such as communal customs, prayers, taboos, and rites. Variations abounded, but these were the early convoluted versions of human culture and its main intent: to control. Henceforth, culture's core function became a means of forcing conformity, to transform the individual into a tool of submission and production for the ruling elite.

“As generations passed, these rulers and their predecessors continually revised and enlarged their constructs of culture, force-feeding the functional and nonfunctional—rational and irrational—parts to your forbears. Naturally, it didn't take long in evolutionary terms before people everywhere existed within a universal baggage culture, full of compounded dysfunction. Of course, in modern times, control of human culture has changed hands from the ruling elite to whole governments, religious institutions, multicontinent ethnic groups, and most recently, to mega-corporations and mass media. As the complexities and population of the world ballooned, baggage culture continued to prove versatile and useful to whatever cause it engaged. Nations governed through it. Religions preached through it. Ethnic groups taught their heritages through it. Big business sold through it. And the media communicated through it.

“To cement their totalitarian agendas, these supersized institutions’ advancing baggage culture implemented ever more effective methods of control over society. Chief and most potent amongst them was the inversion of *reason*, where cultural forces obliged you to rationally accept the irrational. By corrupting the rational way you thought and interpreted life, they simultaneously corrupted the necessity and power of reason altogether. In that devious way, mysticism, ancestral divinity, the supernatural, religion, and even the institutions’ all-important puffed-up selves were seen as valid outcomes of a supposedly sensible, straightforward, and successful society.

“Altruism was another foul form of control—the outlandish idea that everybody else comes first but you. Filial piety was similar; children’s life ambitions were stifled so they could remain loyal and attentive to aging parents and family. Another means of control was consumer addiction to unnecessary materialism, part of a comprehensive worldwide distraction program that met with overwhelming success. The same can be said for how humans groomed and clothed themselves—now a petty, global pastime. Bombardment of advertisements instilling loyalty to corporations was another. Unnecessary but sensational news has been one of the latest crazes. A new one still gaining strength is celebrity worship. Insanely, the list goes on and on.

“To transhumanists, the most grotesque of all the methods of control was the perpetuation of fear in your lives; not by the threat of violence, but by implicit guilt. This powerful psychological addiction of worrying about what others think of you, and about what is socially acceptable to others, has been systematically instilled in humans for thousands of years, perpetrated by every world religion, ethnicity, and government. Its aim is to weaken people’s wills and to silence their most precious independent tool: the ability to freely, guiltlessly, and publicly judge and criticize the world around them. In that way, people became afraid to pick apart others and their behaviors; afraid to deride society and its routines; afraid to upend their own world and circumstances; and, ultimately, afraid to differentiate between good and evil, utility and irrationality, strength and weakness, equal and non-equal—essentially all value itself. Such pervasive social control through the fear of others’ opinions has left you meek, ashamed, and largely unwilling to openly question or challenge a thing like the omnipresent state. Or your sacred heritages. Or the rife sense of needing to be wealthier than your neighbors. Or your supposedly sinless and perfect gods. The spicy, troublesome, confrontational bigot in you is often your best and most useful part, and they have strangled it out of most of you in the guise of what they call ‘open-mindedness’ or ‘politically correct social behavior.’

“Ultimately, implicit guilt and culture’s many other devices of submission are designed to make you totally subscribe to one single concept: you should be afraid to rise to being as powerful an entity as you can; you should be afraid to try to become God. That is the essence and outcome of your baggage culture. And until today, this is where modern human civilization has brought you.

“Did you ever wonder why your major religions have made blasphemy the greatest sin—the one that can’t be forgiven and is damned by eternal suffering? Or why your governments have made democracy the holy grail of sociopolitical orders, where everyone is equal despite lack of merit? Or why your ethnicity compels you to obey the laws and mores of your forefathers, who are archaic and long dead? Or why you spend endless hours making pennies only to consume things that make zero difference in the ultimate outcome of your lives? Your acceptance and sanction of your culture and its conditioning propensities is the key to their entire power over the human race. With it, you remain meek in your fairytale thoughts, for which they created the structure, language, and possibilities.

“The truth is so simple to see once you understand it: Religion, ethnic heritage, state power, material addiction, and media entrapment are nothing more than pieces of an intangible psychological construct designed to keep you thinking and living a certain way. It’s designed to keep you in fear of becoming as powerful as you can be; to keep you producing for others and contributing to *their* overall gain, and not your own.

“Today, our species’ baggage culture is a gargantuan mindless monster, consuming and dominating everything it can. Even its main pushers—the overarching institutions—can’t control it anymore;

instead, they always find it controlling and devouring *them*. There's no escape from the confusion and redundancy anymore, from the vestigial aspects of stacking useless cultural constructs upon each other. If you think one tailbone in the human body is pointless, imagine a hundred of them weighing you down. Figuratively, that's what baggage culture looks like. Many of your thoughts are piles of ignorance and erroneous ideas stacked upon piles of ignorance and erroneous ideas. We are unable to think freely and escape our slovenly, derelict pasts.

"Consider the typical religious, government, ethnic, corporate, and media headlines you hear every day: *Poverty and Hunger Continue Rising Around the Globe; Religious Terrorism Kills Dozens; Government Heads Clash over Insurmountable Debt; Ethnic Strife Sparks Threat of New Civil War; Housing Crisis Looms After Superstorm; New Virus Outbreak Resists Antibiotics; Celebrity Stars Besieged by Sex Scandals*. Everything you see and hear around you is pushed by sensationalistic breaking news reports, flashy advertisements, and fearmongering end-of-the-world dramas and threats. The onslaught of bombastic information and the fraudulent feelings it creates are constant and ubiquitous, reigning havoc on everything they influence. Throw in universal sex objectification, panicky environmental doomsday scenarios, omnipresent male chauvinism, and an abysmally deficient planetwide education system, and the impact on today's world is easy to see. You can't make a move or think a thought without being inside its encumbering web, without participating in it as an integral player. And, in the end, none of it makes a damn bit of difference to you in a real way—you're still going to die. The clock on your life is still ticking down every second.

"There are those few throughout history, especially in this last century, who saw this bondage for what it was, and tried to defy it. Nevertheless, every time some new champion attempted to stand up and break out of the baggage culture with rational progressive ideas, with cutting edge science, with creative intellectual unorthodoxy to improve the world, the powers and concepts that existed deemed it anarchy, criminal, and the work of some great revolutionary evil. Even today, one can still get stoned to death in many places in the world, if they stand up for the truth and say such things aloud. Or they will get arrested, covered with a black hood, thrown into prison, and tortured by the supposedly humanitarian A10 governments. Or they will be forever forced into exile and branded a villain of humanity by everyone else everywhere. They forced those few outliers to the fringe of society for being different, then cast them as heretics, criminals, and traitors—warning all others that only God, the nation, ethnic heritage, or a large bank account, could change and explain the world. And then, only through a renunciation of one's sins and wild notions, and by living a quiet, untroubled life in society.

"They closed the trap when they added: Now, quickly, all of you, salute the flag and your leaders; then go get a job, get married, mortgage a house, have some kids, go to church, pay your taxes, save for your old age, give to the poor, and don't you dare break the law of the land—*their* law, based on thousands of years of religious, ethnic, and powermongering government. To further confuse you and keep everyone subdued, they cultivated and nurtured your addiction to materialism by offering you shiny trinkets for shamelessly low prices, and told you to busy yourself with buying every consumer brand name possible from every supermall and corner store you know; that impressing everyone with your sophisticated knowledge and enthusiastic participation in the latest fashions and trends was the highest pleasure of life; that buying was patriotic and the best proof of your worth as a person. Commercialism and obsessive material acquisition were the last gilt bars cast for their perfect cage, to keep you submissive and conforming.

"Some seven billion of you have signed on to this bullshit. Some seven billion of you are religious consumer-addicted patriots. Some seven billion of you have been brainwashed to play nicely with your brothers, sisters, and neighbors, regardless of who they are. To embrace egalitarian socialist ideas. To bow to God, politicians, fear, and everything else. And to worry about what kind of car you drive, what brand of shoes you wear, what color your nail polish is, what sports team you root for, what church or mosque you kneel in. Is it any wonder that a few hundred of my self-motivated engineers defeated seven billion of you? Is it any wonder that I stand here in control of all 25,000 of your planet's nuclear

devices, with the ability to annihilate each one of you if I want?

“Again—questions: How did that happen? Why did that happen?

“Are you beginning to understand why an evolution of values is necessary for you? Are you beginning to see how foolhardy and misled you are?

“But first, there is one more specter haunting and hindering you. In addition to living in bondage by baggage culture, you are also handicapped by your biology. Humans operate tens of thousands of years behind evolution with their inherited instincts, which means our behavior is not suited towards its current environment. On Transhumania, we like to say evolution is always late to the dinner party. We have instincts that apply to our biology in a world that existed ages ago; not a world of skyscrapers, cell phones, jet air travel, the Internet, and IVF fertility. We must catch up to ourselves. We must evolve our thinking to adapt to where we are in the evolutionary ascent. We must force our evolution in the present day via our reasoning, inventiveness, and scientific technology. Our outdated instincts now trick us from knowing right from wrong, practical from impractical. We must stand guard against our genes, less they chain us to remaining as animals forever.

“The human body and its biology constantly highlights our many imperfections. Compared to humans, rats have better noses for smelling. Pigeons have sharper eyes for seeing. Crocodiles can run faster. Earthworms can survive underwater longer. Cockroaches can survive far colder temperatures. Humans are only best at reasoning. Yet, computers can already beat the best of us in chess, math, and physics. And the robots we’ve made are far stronger than we are, can handle more danger, and can fly through interstellar space without us. Obviously, the human body is a mediocre vessel for our actual possibilities in this material universe. Our biology severely limits us. As a species we are far from finished and therefore highly unacceptable. The transhumanist believes we should immediately work to improve ourselves via enhancing the human body and eliminating its weak points. This means ridding ourselves of flesh and bones, and upgrading to new cybernetic tissues, alloys, and other synthetic materials, including ones that make us cyborglike and robotic. It also means further merging the human brain with the microchip and the impending digital frontier. Biology is for beasts, not future transhumanists.

“Our outdated biology’s emphasis on social interaction is also dangerous for the overall evolutionary ascent of the human race—so dangerous that new questions must be asked immediately. Are so many of you necessary on this planet? Should the least valuable of you be allowed to procreate? Is the sexual ritual even functional anymore? Does matrimony serve purposes outside of private property and economics? Are social customs like monogamy foolishly conservative? Should all violent and dangerous repeat criminals be executed without delay? Should society insist that all government and military leadership be equally split between females and males? Should all televisions be destroyed and Hollywood bulldozed? Should corporations be barred from catering to the weak, petty sides of human nature? Should religion and superstitious faiths be globally outlawed? These are challenging and thorny questions to ask. Yet, they should be asked, and the best answers should be implemented if we are to be true to our highest selves.

“For a long time, civilization has operated off the principal of attempting to uphold the greater good of the human race, cajoling us all to participate in mammalian truisms. Today, however, the greater good is not the best or most efficient path of evolutionary advancement for the species. Society and the evolution of the human race may not be best served by having so many billions of people living together—to breed disease, poverty, crime, corruption, civil unrest, and resource destruction. In our past history, evolution and exponential growth of the species were suitable when we needed more offspring to guarantee gene distribution, or more bodies hurling spears at a mammoth we were communally hunting. Now, evolution can be harnessed best by quality, not quantity; by the smartest rational guidance, not more baggage-culture-driven progeny. If you’re not necessary and do not serve a transhuman purpose, and you also destroy resources for those who are necessary and serve transhuman purposes, you may not be allowed to exist.

“The world is on the threshold of so much revolutionary change. Clearly, our inadequate biological makeup and our baggage culture prompt an evolution of all values for every non-transhumanist on the planet to prosper in that change. The result of your lives thus far and the outcome of this war prompt it. Your survival and your best self are literally at stake. But to accomplish an evolution of values, you must carefully plan to navigate the correct path for your future; otherwise, you may end up no better than you are now. There are two all-important ways to navigate a correct path in the new transhuman future: The first is to constantly use the utmost reasoning of which your brains are capable, while negotiating your way through life; the second is to incessantly question everything.

“Reason is the only means for human survival on this planet. And it is also our only means for arriving at coherent truths. Anything else belongs in the domain of the mystic, the domain of the insane, or the domain of the thief whose aim is to take something valuable from you for their own gain. The best way for an individual to apply reason in their life, given their goals, is by constantly evaluating as many pertinent scenarios as possible for their actions; then, undertaking the most statistically probable ones to follow, that will work out in their greatest favor. You must strive to emulate the pure computational process of a goal-driven computer. Most of you do not use reason and logic so constantly in life. Most of you regularly incorporate irrationality, erroneous past prejudices, and the whims of spontaneous emotions in your daily decisions; your minds weakly bend to what you want to see and feel regardless of what is really happening. This is a byproduct of the baggage culture, where all your inner yearnings, reactions, and interactions with the world are fabricated delusions, part of an overreaching conformity trap. It’s impossible think and live that way, and still make any transhuman sense of life.

“Even using the utmost reasoning of which your brains are capable, changing your current flawed values and methods of living will be extremely difficult. For many of you, the thoughts and irrational patterns of your daily lives are deeply ingrained in you. With tremendous effort, however, you will succeed. Success will come if you emulate Transhumanists in utilizing and vocalizing one word more than any other. Believing in that sacrosanct word is the key to properly navigating an evolution of values. That word is *why*.

“In this new world, you must learn to repeatedly ask yourselves, *Why*? It is the most important utterance the individual should ever know. You should use this sacred word with obsessive zeal; you should fall in love with the unknown and question everything. Including this speech. *Why* is a word and a concept Earth’s leaders in the past 10,000 years have tried to deny you in their efforts to harness and control you. It is a word your biology has even thwarted you from saying, as it unknowingly holds on to obsolete instincts. As a result, most of you don’t even know you should be saying the word so frequently. Yet, without saying it, you’ve automatically lost every battle that confronts you. The nature of such a disguised dilemma makes your chances of fighting for yourselves impossible. You don’t even know what there is to win, let alone what there is to fight for, or that there even *is* a fight. So many people suffer from this essential ignorance in their lives that there are haunting problems and handicaps in their perspectives, beliefs, and consciousnesses. Many would struggle to the death—and indeed do—just to prove they are right about everything they have been conditioned to believe. Yet, this doesn’t change their ignorance or problems one iota. The best action to meaningfully change your course in this universe is to frequently start asking, *Why*?

“The depressing truth is that throughout history, all the way up until yesterday, most everything around has betrayed you. Your cultures have manipulated you. Your morals have failed you. Your religions have lied to you. Your governments have suppressed you. Your media has tricked you. Your corporations have exploited you. Your biology has hindered you. And your interpretations of it have blinded you. But now, from this moment onward, all that is behind you. Today, my nation and I proclaim your ignorance over. Today, the veil of illusion has been pulled off your heads. Transhumania and I deem irrationality—via baggage culture and the inability to overcome our outdated biology—rescinded. It’s time to join the new transhuman reality and its way of being. It’s time for you to evolve

your values to see things transparently, and then to act appropriately. To do this improperly—to do this any other way—is to muck up our chance to overcome death, our own evolutionary ascent, and our ability to overcome whatever else the universe can throw at us.

“On Transhumania, our own evolution of values has made us understand what we are capable of and where we are going. We learned to not live in the past, but on the edge, where evolution advances. And we adjust our principles and actions as we go, based on that changing edge—based on reasoning in our brains that instructs us what will work best now, and also in the future. We live according to what we believe we are becoming; we call it the *futurization of values*. We do it because we know the universe is not finished. The universe is changing, evolving. And with it, each of us is evolving. The human race is evolving. And in this evolution, a modification of values is not only immediately necessary, but also constantly necessary. This evolution and its futurization of values is the examination and comprehension of everything we consider important, and it is the best foothold we have in facilitating our climb to the highest powers we can achieve. By living that way, we will inevitably *become* that way—the way we desire.

“The reason transhumanists became far stronger than you is not in our numbers, our might, or our courage. It’s in our understanding of how the philosophy of evolution takes place. Our interpretation of values taught us that evolution and its ascent of technology do not operate off democratic principles, but off principles of might, off principles of survival. You have forgotten this. You need to remember the truth, especially this one essential truth: Nothing and no one is equal. It is crucial for all advanced thinking beings to understand the strength and sophistication of the human race were founded upon the longstanding verity of inequality. Simply said, each race is smarter than the other in some way. Each sex is better than the other in some endeavor. Each body is better designed for some activity than another. Each mind on the planet is better suited for various actions than another. Everyone stands somewhere in a hierarchy of individual, social, and universal worth. Distinction and differentiation of beings are at the center of all life. We are all value-assessing entities. We are all judgmental bigots. We should embrace that and act on it. Throughout history, it’s the reason the strong became stronger and the weak became weaker, until the weak were no more, and the strong had to compete against each other—leaving, again, one group stronger than the other. This remarkable cycle perpetuates the efficient technique of evolution. Most of you have circumvented it in your orgies of democracy, your forays into collectivism, your promotion of multiculturalism. Pretense at a politically correct universal equality has left you weak-minded, unreasonable, and downtrodden. On Transhumania, we have not forgotten the disparity of all values; we have embraced it.

“What, then, is the basis for dealing with this fundamental inequality that pervades civilization, for a morality that fits with transhumanists and their new world? What, then, if it’s not to serve others? Or to work for the greater good? Or to uphold the commonly accepted Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you? All those cheerleading, do-gooder maxims are nonsense to the transhumanist. The basis of a transhumanist’s morality consists of this: I would do anything and everything to get what I want—so long as it doesn’t meaningfully interfere with the nature of the thing I want. Emulating the unwavering synchronized order of a machine, a genuine transhumanist would undergo any path to become its finest self. That’s its most dominant desire, to rise to its best and become as powerful as possible. A transhumanist has no immediate concern for others, for family, for state, for heritage, for humanity, for God; only for its power, and the preservation and growth of that power.

“Nonetheless, a transhumanist maintains superb overall personal integrity, as well as strict logical and reasonable methods for dealing with people and other values on this planet. Currently, the transhumanist still very much needs other people and sees value in what others can offer. A transhumanist sees much worth in using them for what one can gain. And if that requires trading, or giving back in return, or caring for others, then the transhumanist thinks it’s a good deal, a meaningful deal, a fair deal. The transhumanist also likes the Earth and nature, and feels bound to it—but knows

the planet is not a permanent home; it's just a starting point. The transhumanist likes and supports materialism and the acquisition of it—but not when it's dysfunctional or consumes people and their lives. The transhumanist strives for happiness—but knows that scientific progress and evolutionary fulfillment in one's life is at least as important. The transhumanist doesn't believe in acting irrational—and never goes against evolutionary ascent. The transhumanist supports the immediate family entity—but knows the individual is always the most important factor. The transhumanist doesn't believe in nor cares about heritage, origin, or the past—only potential, value, and the future. The transhumanist believes in discrimination when it involves merit, efficacy, and consequence—and no other form of it. The transhumanist believes people have the right to do with their bodies what they want—unless it directly and obviously deters human enhancement and life extension goals of other transhumanists; in such a case, may the stronger force, seeking to evolve in the universe, win.

"Eventually, transhuman entities and technology will advance so far that paradigm shifts of social and moral standards will be required; especially, new mores that allow us to successfully coexist amongst one another. Until then, however, this is what you can expect on our planet in the near future: Transhumania will establish a worldwide government to efficiently maintain civil society—as little government as possible to remain expedient in reaching transhuman goals. Transhumania will fund its government with taxation of everyone's income—as little taxation as possible to reasonably govern. Transhumania will continue to support basic human rights and freedoms—but only if it doesn't hinder or limit essential transhuman ambitions. Transhumania will promote capitalism, competition, free trade, and private property around the world—so long as it doesn't impede or counter the overall transhuman mission. Transhumania will employ judicial due process and fair laws of justice guiding social endeavors—but all courts, judges, and lawmakers will now be required to promote the greater transhuman agenda. Transhumania will strive to settle all disputes, conflicts, and problems without violence—but it firmly believes in possessing the most powerful weapons, having an aggressive police force, and using military might against enemies. Transhumania will implement a strict worldwide family planning policy: People who can reasonably and successfully raise children will be allowed to procreate and encouraged to do so; all others will not be allowed to procreate. Transhumania will support and advance the best healthcare and medical innovation possible—but insists that all people acquire it themselves at their own expense if they desire it. Transhumania will offer no retirement options nor public pensions—transhumanists either die natural deaths, cryonically freeze themselves while still alive, or, preferably, never retire. Transhumania will halt all free government handouts to people—transhumanists do not believe in welfare; your freebies are over.

"There is, however, one all-important service Transhumania will provide completely gratis. Transhumanists vehemently believe in comprehensive, religion-free, scholastic education; from this moment forward, decreed by law of Transhumania, no one on the planet is exempt from receiving an adequate one. If you do not have a college education or the equivalent of it—if you don't know how to solve advanced mathematical problems; can't competently read classical literature; don't understand evolutionary biology; haven't written essays exploring the humanities; don't know the essentials of modern physics; can't efficiently use a computer; don't intimately know the planet's geography; can't recognize important art and music—then you are going back to school. Transhumania doesn't care whether you receive your education in formal classrooms, at night schools, via online learning, or through self-teaching with regular outside testing—but you will need to achieve an acceptable level of intellectual capacity and performance in order to be allowed to live freely on Planet Earth. The new cognitive advantages of mass education will help bring our civilization to accept transhumanism and to overcome baggage culture. You do not have a choice in this massive decree; this is a universal Transhumanian conscription—not one for war, but for brains. In our modern world, ignorance is not only a tragedy, but also a crime that will be punishable by excessive fines and hard labor in prison.

"Additionally, for those who interfere with the daunting task of educating the world—especially chauvinistic, religious-minded men holding back females and family members they think they own—

you will be publicly executed.

“For many of you, the revolutionary ideas of the forthcoming new society on Earth carry a stench of selfishness, self-righteousness, pro-elitism, and oppression. They counter much of what you have believed in and have experienced throughout life, so far. Yet, do not tell me such a domineering, egotistical world is bound to fail. I tell you now: It will not. Do you think a transhuman civilization based on self-merit, reason, abundant education, and prodigious ambition will tear itself apart and destroy itself? I tell you this civilization will thrive like nothing you can imagine. Many of the weak, ignorant, lazy, and inconsequential people on the planet may get left behind, but the human race’s evolutionary ascent will sharply rise. In time, we will be healthier than ever, richer than ever, more educated than ever, and more advanced than ever. Transhumanists’ fastidious expertise will push our species to greater speeds and heights of progression, forcing everyone to be better and better. We have already proved our mettle and worth in our quick climb to power.

“Additionally, do not tell me that the world will become overpopulated and environmentally unsound if humans no longer die. The Earth can handle ten times more people than it has now, if properly managed with care for our environment and limited resources. With reason and scientific technological fixes, we can readily grow the population of creators and innovators on this planet without compromising the Earth’s environment. Besides, in less than a century, most of you will not be biological anymore. You will already be part machine, part cyborg, part whatever the evolutionary course takes for us to become stronger and more adept. Many of your ecological, resource, and material concerns and fears will become irrelevant—just like myriad past worries and foibles in our species’ history.

“Furthermore, do not tell me that if the human race morphs into superior forms—such as cyborgs, conscious machines, and even artificial intelligences—the magic and mystery of the universe will be lost. No such thing will happen. The universe has far more magic and mystery than our small human brains can currently know. You may believe that the thoughts, actions, and experiences of an artificial entity will be cold, sterile, superficial, and meaningless. What utter nonsense. These new entities will have more capacity and potential than humans ever did, and they will quickly become the greatest, most complex, most interesting beings and forces on the planet. The species transhumanists create and evolve into in the near future will have the power and intelligence of thousands, if not millions, of human beings combined. And in that new, noble world, we shall find plenty to keep our interests hearty. We shall finally begin to see how big the universe truly is and how it really operates. That not-so-distant future will prove far more magical and mysterious than where we are now.

“Finally, do not tell me that God, or some infinite justice, or some imaginary karma, will come and redeem the human race, and punish Transhumanians for their arrogance and evil. Stop hoping for such nonsense. Your twisted fairy tales have left you feeble and naive. We, the transhumanists, are now in charge. And we are asking you to join us and to contribute to the new world.

“People of Earth, these are my final words: The moment has arrived for a new philosophy, morality, culture, and intellectual vibrancy for the planet, prompted by the leadership of transhumanists and a worldwide futurization of values. New ethics and rules will emerge. That is the nature of the transformation. Transhumanists will undergo great change in order to become their best and most advanced selves. Ultimately, we will evolve into stronger, more durable, more ideal beings. Form follows function is the strategy of a perfect entity; it will come to dominate our behavior over the coming centuries. This is the natural course of evolution, the most rational course. You may say we are monsters because we will soon amputate our limbs and cut out our organs, and replace them with better synthetic, robotic, and cybernetic parts. Or because some of us already have computer chips in our heads, enhancing our lives and behaviors. Or because we adhere to an egotistical, unforgiving set of ethics that favors the individual and the rise of undemocratic technology. But those of you who survive long enough into the future will all act and think like that.

“The coming androids, cyborgs, thinking robots, artificial intelligence systems, and other

transhuman entities in our civilization will operate off different ethics than do purely biological beings. Their value systems will be sounder, less emotionally fragmented, more purely related to computational logic, and free of baggage culture and archaic instincts. They may not need food; they may not need sunlight; they may not need air. They may not even need the Earth at all anymore. They will be stronger and more resilient than we are. Those are all the reasons Transhumanians will promote them—and why we will transform ourselves into them. We transhumanists are on an ascent from being frail, disease-prone savages to being conscious, self-designed entities that may never need health maintenance again. And after that, who knows what we will become and how far we will evolve.

“I hope you are beginning to see what the new world will be like. I hope you are beginning to understand the bold power of transhumanism and the superlative difference it will make in your lives. I especially hope each one of you will make the right choice now that the Transhumanist Wager has been offered to you. Don’t be imprudent and dismiss the opportunity to improve yourselves and your existence. Cast off your stifling baggage culture and the outdated instincts pervading your thoughts and ambitions. Question everything, learn as much as you can, and use reason to help you see the truth. I tell you now: The end of the human species as you know it is upon us. Prepare yourself for it. Don’t fear it. Embrace it. Contribute to it. You will become more yourself—your best self, your *transhuman* self.

“If you want to join us, now is your chance. Stand up for yourself and against your own ineptitude, and help us produce and fulfill the transhuman mission. The transhuman mission is stated in the *TEF Manifesto*, which each original Transhumanian citizen has accepted. It says: *The transhuman mission is to pursue the most expedient course an individual can take to reach one's most powerful and advanced self, whose primary purpose is to overcome anything that gets in the way of that goal; namely, death.*

“Otherwise, if you do not agree with us and with our mission, if you choose to refuse the logic and sensibility of the Transhumanist Wager, then get out of the way—or be thrown out of the way. We have a new world to forge. And we will not stop until we achieve it.

“May the Transhuman Revolution last forever.”

## Chapter 34

People all around the globe listened, humiliated and terrified.

Many were also fiercely outraged. How dare someone threaten to push them back into the Dark Ages! How dare some tiny clan decide the fate of all peoples on Earth! How could God or Jesus or Allah or Krishna let this happen? Where was that higher power? Where was divine intervention?

Everywhere, people wished their gods and prophets would do something. They wished their governments and politicians would do something. They wished their friends and neighbors would do something. All their wishing was in vain. All their fury, devotion, prayers, and longstanding convictions were now for nothing. No one could do anything for them. Their egos had blinded them; their leaders had failed them; their fellow citizens were too weak and ignorant to help them. Their own fears, emotions, and heartfelt beliefs in higher powers were revealed as nothing but silly superstitions, like those of the Stone Age humans who worshiped the moon and sun, tens of thousands of years ago.

A vast swath of the human race was defeated. By themselves. By those who are stronger and smarter than they are. By those who declared in a final way: *You are not necessary to us unless you add value to our lives.*

Amongst the billions around the world, a scant few rejoiced. They voiced their opinions to others. They tried to explain, pleading, “Aren’t you listening to them? Don’t you see they are smarter than we are, work harder than we do, and make more of themselves than we do? They are saying to join them in

the brilliantly new and unlimited twenty-first century—the age when anything is possible on Earth. And, do you know what? They are right. Furthermore, they are inspiring. Perhaps most importantly, they are straightforward and rational about everything. They are not the lip-servicing, finger-pointing, welfare-promising leaders who strangled and sunk the world into irrationality and mediocrity. And that is precisely the reason they can give us so much more."

Soon, others began to agree, adding, "Even that's not as important as this: Who fundamentally cares who our leaders are right now, as long as we ourselves are not enslaved? What are transhumanists asking us to do? Thrive in our careers. Live longer and healthier lives. Become educated. Strive after the best in ourselves. Give our families a better future. Support technology and the evolutionary advancement of our species instead of supporting a conservative, superstitious, collectivist planet. What's wrong with that?"

For many people, a few days of contemplation were enough. The sun still rose the following morning; companies still expected employees to show up for their jobs; bills still needed to be paid for services; food still needed to be grown and harvested. Everything was essentially the same. Except now, there were rules in place that meant more of the money and resources hard-working people earned went into their own pockets, and less went to the slackers and freeloaders around the world who didn't want to work—or to the politicians who promised those slackers and freeloaders undeserved healthcare, food, and free money.

Inevitably, the initial shock and humiliation wore off. More and more people started to consider the new rules of the future and the brave possibilities as a chance to rid themselves of the mighty global recession. It wasn't an easy transition or one without massive upheaval. A great chaos ensued, as looting and crime spiked throughout the world. To counter this, Transhumania ordered all policemen's and soldiers' salaries around the world doubled, to keep them working and fulfilling their duties. They were instructed to execute criminals on-site if they were caught in illegal acts. Curfews were put in place and martial law was installed. More robots and drones were built to help with peacekeeping.

Currencies, commodity, and stock-trading exchanges around the world were temporarily frozen at exactly the monetary amounts at which they had been the day before the Transhumanian bombing raids. This helped curb economic chaos as well as price fluctuations on everyday goods. Business executives and entrepreneurs around the world were given extensive power and government IOUs to keep their companies functioning and surviving. All utility companies distributing power, natural gas, and water were told to operate without fail. Trash collection, sewer service, and road maintenance all continued. The Internet was made to work efficiently and flawlessly. Banks were forced to keep their doors open and to render services normally. Schools, institutes, and universities were ordered to continue classes and to begin preparing for enormous future expansion of their curricula and student populations.

If country rulers, politicians, and officials tried to negotiate or hold on to their former power, they were killed by robots patrolling the planet on Transhumanian aircraft. Jethro Knights also insisted that a large number of important international politicians, revered religious leaders, and royal families—like the President of the United States, the Ayatollahs, and the monarchs of England and the Middle East—be publicly removed from their domains of power. These well-known leaders and families had all their wealth confiscated too, including their extravagant residences, their jets, their yachts, their cars, and their bank accounts—essentially, everything they owned or possessed.

The Transhumania News Network, IMN, and other television reporters broadcast the dramatic occurrences, which included forcefully removing the high-fliers from their castles, temples, and mansions. They also filmed provocative images of large military trucks carrying away valuables: family heirlooms, famous artworks, ornate jewelry pieces, and sacred religious relics. Everything collected was deposited to be destroyed or sold in the newly established TANIP, the Transhumania Agency of New Infrastructure and Projects. The same public dismantling happened to known warlords, gang leaders, corrupt business people, and mafia bosses, as well as anyone who tried to gain localized

power during the transitional chaos.

Once members of former governments and other influential people around the world saw what became of their top leaders and those who attempted to grab power, they quickly became willing to cooperate in order to keep their jobs, wealth, status, and safety.

It took almost twelve months for the upheaval on the continents to dissipate, but eventually countries stabilized, and the masses realized that little had changed in their immediate lives. Except that stronger leaders were now in place—ones who were much more honest, direct, and prolific. Ones who could quickly lead the planet into advanced globalization and unprecedented prosperity. These new leaders—all handpicked Transhumanians—coordinated with existing officials of bested countries to create huge, novel industries that jump-started economic reform. Massive infrastructure projects were initiated, providing many millions of new jobs and fresh careers for people around the world. Ground was broken on hundreds of gargantuan learning centers, schools, and universities. Taxes across the globe were lowered to a straight 15 percent for everyone: rich or poor, healthy or sick, a Transhumania supporter or not.

Jethro Knights forced all international borders open on the six populated continents, declaring the whole world “Transhumania.” He initiated a single currency, the TEF Unit—a ubiquitous virtual currency. Over the next five years, all other physical monies would eventually be converted into the new currency. These changes simplified life; people moved wherever they wanted, whenever they saw opportunity and the possibility to prosper.

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Senator Gregory Michaelson and his family were forced into hiding with Senator Shuman and other top U.S. dignitaries. They managed to escape Transhumania's drones by disappearing into the underground chambers of Camp Anderson, located deep in the Utah desert. But their communication with the outside world was permanently cut off when Oliver Mbaye ordered all military satellite antennas in the area scrambled.

A year later, in the middle of a blinding snowstorm, Gregory, Amanda, and their two children covertly left Camp Anderson and joined with the myriad Christian coalition groups holed up in the Bible Belt of America, a sliver of rural wasteland from Kansas to Louisiana. One night when Gregory was out scavenging for supplies, Amanda and their two children—dirty, hungry, and wearing ragged clothing—were secretly driven in a large four-wheel drive out of the Christian area. She and the kids were taken to stay with her still wealthy father in Florida. Amanda had deliberately not told Gregory about her escape plans. She was furious with her husband's failures and what had become of her life. Her farewell to him was a condescending single-page letter, instructing him never to contact her or their children again.

Dejected and broke, Gregory remained in the Christian areas of America that gave constant armed resistance to Transhumania. His title and position of senator was soon dropped, as the Christian groups in America formed new hierarchies of power amongst themselves, mostly led by preachers and ex-military types with hardcore, born-again-for-Jesus attitudes. The groups fought Transhumania with terrorism and guerrilla warfare, hoping to eventually reclaim the planet for themselves. Other religious clusters around the world, regardless of their denominations or beliefs, did the same.

The rebels collectively called themselves the Pro-Religious Anti-Transhumanists, or PRAT coalition. But, they were almost never successful in scoring victories against Transhumania, whose robot-led military routinely defeated them, often massacring hundreds of faith-filled fighters in daily skirmishes. PRAT terrorist weapons were located by heat-imaging rays beamed from satellites in orbit, so even the task of moving a detachment of soldiers or bringing bombs into a transhuman city was

usually met with a drone or a soldierbot fifty miles from any populated area.

Gregory Michaelson joined PRAT and quickly became a valued field officer. A year into his service, during a weapon-smuggling mission on a moonless night in Arkansas, a Transhumanian drone caught him and six other PRAT members transporting twenty grenade launchers. Gregory was identified, processed, and incarcerated by polibots into a high security penitentiary. Two months later, while awaiting trial, he was beaten to death in a prisonwide clash between Christian and Muslim gangs, whose thousand-year enmity had still not ceased.

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The PRAT coalition claimed a civil war was ongoing in America and around the world. But rarely did the religious terrorists and guerrilla fighters accomplish anything. When they did, their disruptions to transhuman society and the economy only made normal people, rich or poor, despise them. In the end, most PRAT members abandoned their cause. Without jobs, funds, and government subsidies, their worlds were wastelands of pain, poverty, and squalor. PRAT people were increasingly forced to travel by foot on dusty roads and live in rickety shacks, spending their time searching for food and clean water, wearing only rags and bearing decades-old rifles—instead of waging a war against transhumanists who now possessed nearly unlimited resources.

The conflict between PRAT and greater Transhumania lasted for nearly three years. After that, religious terrorism by isolated ultra-radicals continued for another decade, but on a much smaller scale, until it was finally over. Rapid increases in crime-fighting technology by the Transhumanian government made it too difficult for terrorists to launch successful attacks. Those few who tried were arrested and quickly executed.

Despite the achievement of eliminating religious terrorism, spiritual faiths on Planet Earth continued for many years. Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and other religions, as well as communists, cults, and other social orders, weren't outlawed outright; however, they were made illegal to practice or promote in any form in public. Additionally, starting at age two in preschool, religious and superstitious tendencies were strictly taught as foolish, backwards, and irrational. A student came away with the understanding that believing in religion was no different than believing in Santa Claus and his flying reindeer.

Other changes also helped civilization's culture move toward a transhuman mindset. Jethro Knights' law requiring every human to receive a higher education started to gain momentum. Free, high-quality public schools, institutes, and universities popped up everywhere on the planet, often newly built by the government. Many millions of teachers and professors were hired by Transhumania and sent out across the globe to educate.

For over three billion youths, Transhumania's ambitious education agenda meant a nonstop barrage of grade school, high school, and college lessons. For middle-aged and older people with jobs and families, it often meant years of studying late at night and taking online classes. Many also attended school on weekends. Despite the enormous time commitment, nearly everyone discovered something magical about the process; learning was empowerment.

Upon final graduation with a college degree or its equivalent, Transhumania rewarded every student, young or old, with a free round-the-world airplane ticket good for one full year of traveling. Basic food and living expenses were covered. The only requirement: The graduate had to spend at least three months on three different continents over the course of the year.

Experiencing new things, places, and concepts was education, Jethro decreed. Endless government-sponsored publicity campaigns on the benefits of traveling, reading books, creating meaningful and didactic art, attending graduate school, and developing intellectual curiosity were

showered across the media. There was also an emphasis on speaking and writing in Transhumania's official language, Lojban. Public libraries around the world were ordered open twenty-four hours a day, regardless of how big or small. Free Internet access was made to span the entire globe, courtesy of Transhumania. The same public advocating went for fitness and healthy lifestyles. A household's tax rate was dropped from 15 percent to 10 percent if the whole family could show they regularly exercised and maintained healthy body weights. The government upheld a firm public stance that obesity and physical inactivity, when preventable, was contemptible.

Jethro also encouraged scientists to be paraded around the world as society's most important heroes, authorities, and celebrities. Actors played them constantly in Hollywood movies. Dr. Nathan Cohen's birthday was made into a global holiday; Christmas, Easter, Ramadan, Diwali, Hanukkah, and other religious holidays were discontinued. Being a scientist, a futurist, an engineer, or a technologist was the new state of cool. If you weren't an intellectual with progressive thinking and creative futuristic ideas, you were no one in the modern world. The stock market exploded with new technology, biotech, energy, environmental, and education companies going public. They were led by young, colorful CEOs with advanced degrees in the sciences. These men and women became icons of the new transhuman landscape.

Eventually, Jethro dismantled all nuclear warheads on the planet, using the uranium and plutonium to fuel newly built and existing nuclear power plants in areas free of natural disasters. The green infrastructure and transportation projects he commissioned, including solar-powered vehicles, were a giant boom to trade. New Internet cloud services created faster communications and downloads everywhere on the planet. The robotics industry boomed, replacing menial tasks like cleaning, cooking, and driving. Time could be spent on more productive endeavors.

Biotech was bringing unprecedented quality-of-life changes to everyone via human enhancement. To stay youthful, healthy, and competitive with one another, people spent money on functionally upgrading their bodies and the efficacy of their brains—and not so much on their wardrobes, cars, and other material possessions. Economies around the globe jumped due to huge gains in the pharmaceutical sector, where new forms of drugs, energy supplements, and vaccines were revolutionizing lifestyles. Diseases and ailments around the world were constantly being eliminated. Every year, Jethro announced a different illness or virus that the Transhumanian Government would target for curing or eradicating, giving a billion-dollar reward to the team of scientists that succeeded, whether in the private or public sector.

In the seven years since the victory of the Transhuman Revolution, the percentage of people in poverty around the world had dropped from 42 percent to only 13 percent. Polibots, with x-ray infrared vision and satellite-controlled troop coordination, made cities the safest in history, virtually eliminating gangs, mafia, corruption, hard drugs, theft, and violence. Transparency was ubiquitous in all forms of activity; many people opted to have a microchip implanted into the palm of their hand to speed payment of goods and make personal recognition easier in the increasingly all-digital world. Smart phones and computers, reduced to the size of a red grape, were also implanted into the back of people's skulls and connected to their brain's neural network. Technological innovation was rampant; people were always connected, always learning, and always evolving.

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The state of the world and the promise of transhumanism were steadily advancing every year. Consequently, when Jethro Knights—who had remained the undisputed leader of the planet for seventeen years—announced it was time to have democratic elections on Transhumania, many people, including top leaders, gasped.

“What the hell?” Preston Langmore asked Jethro when he heard the news. “What for? What if something goes wrong?”

For the past sixteen years, Langmore had served as one of Transhumania’s most powerful and influential officials: Secretary of Science and Technology.

“Nothing is going to go wrong, Preston. Everyone gets it now. A new generation was born with it. People are transhumanists by nature. The old guard just didn’t realize it before. We’ll do fine. Perhaps better. Democracy has mostly been a sensible thing.”

“Well, you’re going to win the presidency hands down anyway. So I guess it’s all fine.”

“No way. I’m not going to run. I’m going back to Silicon Valley, going back to the womb of transhumanism. I want uninterrupted time to write papers. I want unlimited freedom to think up new technologies and concepts. My top priority will be describing the future and how we can get there faster. Right now, my top priority seems to be managing billions of people, which is an exhausting task.”

“Jethro, this is absurd. Your rise to global dominion is historically unprecedented. What about all the power you’ve accumulated? What about the omnipotender? You’re not going to cast that into the hands of fate?”

“Not whatsoever. It’s all our closest, most loyal friends who run the world. And I’m sure if I’m needed, they’ll call on me to lead again; however, the truth is I’m simply more useful now as a visionary thinker and philosopher, not as a ribbon-cutting, speech-making, macro-managing ruler. Besides, being an elected president or even a benevolent dictator doesn’t mean achieving the highest state of power one can reach. Being where the technology is emerging at the right moment in time—where the Singularity unfolds—offers a far greater chance to accomplish that ultimate goal.”

“That’s not the point!” exclaimed Langmore. “We need you to lead. We need you to run. Who else can manage such a herculean responsibility?”

Jethro smiled at him and said, “Actually, I was counting on a dear friend of mine to try to win the election and lead the world—and I’m sure he will do just fine.”

Jethro pointed at Langmore, implying it was he who would lead. Langmore looked astonished, but in time, he accepted the enormous task.

Eighteen months later, Dr. Preston Langmore ran for the presidency of Transhumania. Jethro Knights put his full support behind him. Even though Langmore was much slower—bearing a head of white frizzy hair from his eighty-four years of life—he won by a substantial margin. He even fit the presidential part. A solid, careful leader, steeped in transhuman history and wisdom—the kind the world needed during its period of transition and expansion.

## Chapter 35

On a morning when President Langmore was entering the last year of his second and final term as leader of Transhumania, Jethro Knights awoke and immediately knew something was amiss. Looking outside his bedroom window towards the surrounding sun-filled hills in Palo Alto, he could feel that his body was weak and unwell. He was sixty-three years old and showing signs of an older but fit man. He had spent most of the past two decades serving on the boards of dozens of startups and leading technology companies, as well as writing various volumes on the ethics and potentials of transhumanism. His latest book contained a challenging concept: whether organized energy and matter could take on moral systems of benevolence in a future society—and whether they should. Of course, one didn’t write anymore: Computer chips, implanted in the forehead and interconnected to the brain’s frontal lobe, dictated all material onto a holographic image screen in front of the writer. Now, even dreams were recorded every night by many people. So many of Jethro’s dreams were still about Zoe

Bach, about what happened to her, about finding her someday.

After a rough night of only a few hours of sleep, Jethro crawled out of bed to make his morning coffee. Near the kitchen he began to feel dizzy, astonished that he was grabbing the marble counter for support and watching his hand slip from it. A moment later, he collapsed onto the floor. Blood began seeping from the corner of his mouth.

The chip in his head immediately notified emergency crews of his condition, but surprisingly, it couldn't diagnose the problem. Jethro's two bodyguards—one polibot and one human, always patrolling outside his cottage—sprinted in and carefully placed him on his bed. He was barely conscious, and his breathing was weak.

Four hours later, in the San Aliza Medical Hospital in San Francisco, a doctor explained to Jethro that he had contracted an extremely rare form of H1L39, a new and mysterious airborne virus out of Madagascar that affected only a tiny population of people, but had recently arrived on the North American Continent. There was no known cure. Jethro was told that he would only have a few months to live without 24-hour *life-dilation*: a tedious medical process which rendered a patient vegetative and mostly unconscious until a treatment was found.

“There’s a cure in the works,” President Langmore fretfully told Jethro a few days later in the hospital during a visit. “But it’s not here yet. The supercomputers can’t break the biological mechanism of the disease for some reason. No one’s bothered with this specific virus because so few people get it.”

“Freeze me. I’ll be back in a few years or so, when there’s a cure and you start reanimating patients.”

“Huh? What are you talking about, Jethro? That’s ridiculous. We’ll keep you on life-dilation. Probably only for a year or two. I’m sure there will be a cure soon now. Oh, I can already see the rush of grants being given to kids doing their Ph.D.s on it now that you, of all people, have it.”

Jethro shook his head. “No thanks, my friend. I don’t want to do life-dilation. I would prefer not to be a vegetable for years. Please take care of the logistics on the cryonics chamber, and I’ll undergo the process in a few weeks. I just want to finish up a few edits for my latest book, then I’ll be ready.”

The President stepped backwards in astonishment, and became frightened when he saw the gravity in his friend’s face. “But Jethro, that’s death!” he exclaimed.

“Precisely,” Jethro answered.

“But no one has ever been successfully reanimated yet. It’s always proved too difficult to do without significantly damaging brain neurons and long-term memory. We don’t even know if it’s possible yet.”

“Of course, it’s possible. The research teams are quite close. In maybe five years—eight years maximum—they’ll be able to do it just fine. There are hundreds of thousands of cryo-preserved patients waiting around the world. Important people. Wealthy people. Some of our good friends. Some of our best scientists from a generation ago, with unwavering willpower and soaring IQs. We’re right at the cusp of achieving reanimation.”

“Jethro, this is absurd. You fought against death your whole life. Your argument is totally beside the point. Nobody gets frozen anymore. Transhumanists like us don’t die anymore.”

“*This* transhumanist does.”

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In three weeks time, after completing his latest manuscript, Jethro Knights was back in the hospital. His disease was beginning to critically sicken him. The doctor at Jethro’s bedside confirmed the cryonics chamber would be suitable for his blood type, pH levels, and genetic base. Cryonics freezing was increasingly used only for people with maladies who chose to be animated while still in

good health, rather than waiting until they were deathly sick—as those kept in the comatose state of life-dilation. More and more, however, few nonreligious people with resources died anymore. At least those who preferred not to, didn't die—not in the prosperous urban places on the planet.

"I don't understand you at all, Jethro. Why die when you don't need to?" asked President Langmore on one of Jethro's last nights alive. "What the hell is going on here with you? Has this disease attacked your brain? This is so unlike you, especially after everything you did and fought for."

"It's fitting I should die, my friend," Jethro answered. "I've always wanted to experience many things. That's part of what living is about."

"But we could keep you on life-dilation. It's so much safer. It's a sure thing. We could probably even keep you conscious on tubes and drugs the whole time if you wanted—for years even."

"That's not a life. It's miserable, foggy, and painful. Although, of course, I would do it if I were worried about not coming back."

"Are you sure? Honestly, sometimes I don't understand you at all."

"Preston, please don't worry about it. I know what I'm doing. Besides, we don't always get to understand everything. Not yet."

"This is asinine, Jethro." Langmore shook his head, frowning.

"Just make sure everything moves forward on Transhumania and that my body is always secure somewhere. I'll be in the hands of my friends. I'll be counting on you all."

"We know. Nothing is going to happen. The world is so damn safe and amazing these days. So much wealth, prosperity, and innovation. I can hardly keep up with it. And now all the interplanetary stuff is starting—Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. You've made it all happen, Jethro. All the exploration and brilliance of life we were capable of achieving. The world will carefully watch over you."

"We, my friend, made it all happen. Every one of us who believed in and fought for transhumanism," he answered, correcting Langmore. Jethro, faint and pale, struggled to adjust himself in his hospital bed. "Let me get some sleep now. I'm exhausted. We can talk more tomorrow."

Three days later, Jethro Knights attended an intimate state dinner where heads of every major principality of Transhumania joined to say farewell to him. Jethro was noticeably weaker and thinner, was pushed around in a wheelchair, and spoke little. He listened to the happenings of the new world and what was anticipated for the next decade. At the end, President Langmore took Jethro to his hovering aircraft on the roof and escorted him back to the hospital. Jethro was going to spend the night there before entering the cryonics chamber in the hospital's basement the following day at 10:00 A.M.

The next morning, a half hour before he departed consciousness, Jethro warmly smiled at Langmore and the other close friends he had invited to be present at his end. Many were top Transhumanian leaders or officials in their fields. They gathered in a semi-circle around his bed. It was hard for Jethro to speak, but he turned to each person and began saying farewell.

"Rachael, the semi-elastic polymer, Fylio, is the most incredible material ever created. The engineers say it's a gold mine for our new cities—*your* new cities. Mile-high skyscrapers that can go through hurricanes, tsunamis, and ten-point-plus earthquakes.

"Oliver, use extreme caution with the interplanetary exploration. So exciting, but watch out for the strange atmospheric bio-diseases and even the extraordinary living minerals Saturn possesses. They might be a Pandora's box.

"Francisco, keep them honest in the media. Force objectivity and didactic journalism to reign over commercialism, sensationalism, and fear-propagating news. Don't let free information be dictated by corporations and their addiction to profits.

"Josh, there are talented hackers on the island of Japan who are rogue. Watch out for them. They are ambitious and power-hungry. They are demonizing the concept of the omnipotender. The rumored god-computer they're trying to build in the Tokyo underground is perhaps the most dangerous threat to our planet."

Jethro started coughing—lightly at first, then more roughly. His voice was hoarse and his throat

ached. He was running a 103-degree fever because of the disease. It was hard for him to continue, but he held up his hand, showing everyone he was okay. He turned to his longtime secretary.

“Janice, thank you for your kindness and efficiency throughout all these years. You’ve been so wonderful. I’ll have plenty more manuscripts for you to help me research when I’m back. Please enjoy house-sitting at my Palo Alto cottage.

“Preston, be on your guard against global political muddles undermining the transhuman mission. A firm, honest ruling hand is always best, both for guidance of our individual selves and for society as a whole.”

Langmore nodded in agreement.

“Also, make sure to publish my latest book while I’m gone. I know you’ll read it and want to edit it. That’s fine, but please don’t Langmore-ize it.”

Everyone in the room chuckled.

The President laughed too, and then blurted out, “Of course, I wouldn’t consider Langmore-izing it. We wouldn’t want it to make the bestseller list, now would we?”

Jethro grinned. He looked warmly at Preston, and then gently smiled at everyone else in the room. But when his eyes came to rest on Frederick Vilimich, standing oddly alone in a far corner, Jethro’s expression turned solemn. The two men looked painfully at each other. The Russian’s face was somber and intense; desperation seeped from it.

Vilimich slowly walked up to Jethro and placed a small, faded picture of his son and wife into his hands, whispering, “Please don’t forget.”

Jethro picked up the photo and looked at it.

“My friend, I’ve thought very carefully of this picture for a long time: thirty-five years, ten months, and fourteen days, to be exact. Don’t fret—I won’t forget it.” Jethro’s voice trailed off as he whispered, “How could I?”

A palpable heaviness washed over everyone in the room: a wave of acute perception. Hairs on people’s backs shot straight up. Everyone, from President Langmore to Oliver Mbaye to the physician in the corner, understood something of enormous consequence, of a hallowed deal in the shadows, of an oathlike promise informally cast decades ago, of carnage carried quietly for thousands of days and nights. It was a startling epiphany, shocking and raw.

Jethro Knights slowly looked at everyone, a sad smile encompassing his face.

“Zoe Bach,” President Langmore finally whispered, his eyes tearing up. “You’re going to look for your wife.”

Jethro nodded his acceptance.

“It’s time now, Mr. Knights,” interrupted the doctor. He tapped a computer tablet that monitored Jethro’s vital signs. “The serum we gave you is peaking, and it’s time-sensitive.”

Jethro turned away from the emotional moment and acknowledged the physician.

“Yes, I know. Thank you, doctor.”

Jethro looked at everyone around him. He joined his knuckles together and made the infinity symbol with his fingers. “I’ll see you all in a few years. Goodbye my friends—my fellow transhumanists.”

The doctor handed Jethro the death inhaler required by the cryonics procedure. Jethro strapped it onto his face himself and began slowly breathing from it.

Soon, Jethro closed his eyes and thought of Zoe Bach—of her extraordinary spirit; of the promise he had made to find her; of the universal dice and all its quantum possibilities. Within sixty seconds, he drifted off into total darkness.

A few minutes later, Jethro’s naked, lifeless body was carefully lifted by a medibot into a glass tank full of a freezing green solution.

## Epilogue

Seven years and four days later, sunlight from a hospital window shot into Jethro Knights' eyes and registered the first cohesive thought in his brain. His eyes were blurry. They stung when his pupils tried to focus. His skin was slippery from the green cryonics compound dripping from his body and all over his hospital bed. A breathing tube was in him, and numerous diodes were attached to his forehead. He could hear voices in the distance. A medibot and a human doctor were handling him, cleaning the goop off his legs and arms. In the doorway, he could see blurs of human faces nervously watching him.

One face in particular, larger than the others—with eye orbs as intense as train headlights—searched him for clues. Jethro focused his vision on Frederick Vilimich, then shut his eyes, trying not to think of Zoe Bach.

Jethro shook his head back and forth. “Nothing,” he groaned, his vocal cords cutting in and out. “Nothing...at...all.”

Devastation struck Vilimich. His thick eyebrows tightened. He clenched his fists and turned away, fighting the tears forming in his eyes.

Eight hours later, when Jethro’s body was more thawed, his vision became less blurry and his hearing increased in sharpness. He was breathing on his own now, and his lungs no longer needed steroids to function. Jethro heard his room door open. He turned slowly to see who was entering.

The doctor monitoring Jethro whispered, “Sir, the former President, Dr. Preston Langmore, is here to see you.”

Langmore walked in, and his face brightened, casting off years of anxiety in a single flash.

“I’m so thankful you’re with us again, my friend. So very thankful.”

Jethro smiled, still too weak to carry on a conversation.

“Don’t try to talk now,” Langmore said. “They say you’ll be much stronger tomorrow already. I just wanted to let you know that all is well—with you and with Transhumania. It’s been longer than we hoped. Seven years. There was a strain of viruses, one of which you caught, that seemingly couldn’t be defeated. We finally nailed it, though, and eventually, during a long reanimation, you were given the antidote. You’re fully cured now.”

“You were right about the reanimation too. They started doing it successfully only twenty-four months after you went under. In fact, the age of your muscles has been slightly reversed to a younger you—about a 40-year-old—and kept in fit shape via digital acupuncture. It’s one of our latest scientific tricks.”

Jethro nodded, uttering, “Thanks.”

“The telomerase reverse-aging process is still relatively new, but you seemed to take the therapy fine. The doctors won’t let me stay long until you’re healthier; however, I’ll be back in two days to fill you in on everything. I came just to let you know everything is *okay*. Rest easy and take your time getting strong again. Bullet points and world news are by your bed when you’re back to reading. You can download them into your chip to make them quicker to view.”

Langmore’s demeanor changed, and he took a deep breath. “I’m sorry about Zoe,” he said, his voice lower. “There will be other chances, Jethro. There will be many other possibilities in the future.”

“See...you...soon,” Jethro mumbled, knowing what he meant.

“By the way,” Langmore whispered, as he rose and walked towards the door, “you’re on the 311th floor of the world’s tallest building. In New York City. Rachael Burton built it. Enjoy the view.”

Jethro Knights’ condition improved by the hour, the result of new cell-reinvigoration technologies. The following day, the doctor wheeled him onto the balcony outside his room, which was heated due to the frigid air of its high altitude. Far below him, Manhattan, Victoria University, the Atlantic Ocean, New Jersey, and New York spread out to the horizon. Jethro smiled when he saw the floating city of Transhumania anchored in the Hudson River. It was now a prestigious college called the Transhumania

Institute of Technology, in which over 25,000 of the world's brightest students were enrolled. There was no doubt he would soon be giving speeches there again.

The following day, Jethro walked out on his own power, using a cane. He spent much of his recovery time on the cold balcony; he watched New York City, the floating college, and the sea, while sitting amongst the clouds. Langmore and many other visitors came to see him, including Vilimich. Jethro told the heartbroken man he had found nothing in death—there wasn't even a recallable image after he lost consciousness. He instructed Vilimich to not give up hope, assuring him there would be other technologies in the future: parallel universes to explore, antimatter, teleportation, multidimensional psychokinesis, quantum manipulation, singularity exploration. Anything and everything. Another decade of exponential scientific and technological growth would give them more chances. Many more.

Over the next few weeks, as Jethro's cells continued to adjust and his body improved, he heard of all the new technologies that hatched while he was cryonically preserved. The changes in only seven years were incredible. Procreation was now done exclusively in test tubes. Genetic engineering was commonplace. All forms of cancer, even the most obscure variants, were fully curable. Mars was an inhabited colony that provided important mineral resources. Artificial Intelligence was ubiquitous, even having its own moral systems and consciousness. Cryonics as an industry was almost extinct because few deadly diseases existed anymore. Reverse-aging enterprises and bionics were some of the biggest fields in science and industry.

On his final day in the hospital, Jethro went out to the balcony as usual. He stared at the world and considered the map of his life and the uncharted possibilities of his future. His muscles ached badly, as he had finished his first jog on a treadmill just an hour before. But he was also excited—he hadn't run so fast in a quarter century. He turned and looked at his reflection in the sliding glass door behind him. A strong, determined, youthful transhumanist stared back. The same transhumanist who had many times stood atop Memorial Vista and surveyed his beloved floating city and imagined its future. Jethro felt powerful, energized, and sublime.

He turned back to the world below. The wind from the far-off ocean rushed around his body and through his hair. He whispered to himself, "This is just the beginning of Jethro Knights."

The End

### Author's Note

This story, *The Transhumanist Wager*, is the result of two decades of thought and inquiry into transhumanism and the quest for scientific immortality. I wrote it hoping to change people's ideas of what a human being is and what it can become.

For more information on the book and its philosophy, please visit:  
<http://www.transhumanistwager.com>