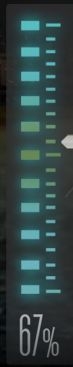


A SCI-FI TECHNO THRILLER SERIES

LS

Nano Contestant

(A FREE URBAN FUTURISTIC FANTASY SCI-FI ACTION ADVENTURE GENETIC TECHNO THRILLER)



EPISODE 1:
WHATEVER IT TAKES

Leif Sterling **1**

Nano Contestant

EPISODE 1: WHATEVER IT TAKES

a serialized sci-fi thriller by
LEIF STERLING

1

Copyright © 2014 Leif Sterling

All rights reserved.

Reproduction in whole or part of this
publication without express written consent
is strictly prohibited.

This is a fiction work. Any resemblance it
bears to reality is entirely coincidental.

Thank you for reading.

For more information and release schedule,
please visit:

www.LeifSterling.com



Table of Contents:

Pronounced	3
Clang	5
Chambers	7
Letter	9
Undisclosed	13
Nano	21
Procedure	25
Undocumented	29
Two	33
Four	38
Jump	49
Run	53
Choke	63
Organic	71
Lethal	77
755	83

Dedication:

*To my Wife, without whom, this would have
never been possible!*

Nano Contestant

EPISODE 1:
WHATEVER IT TAKES

1

CHAPTER ONE:

PRONOUNCED

JANUARY 6TH, 2114: Matthew's hands shook as he watched the jury return from their deliberation. It had taken less than an hour for them to agree on their verdict. These were the twelve people deciding his fate.

Every eye, camera and hologram shifted from Matthew, to the lead juror, as the juror stood. With the conviction of patriotic duty, the juror read the verdict, "We, the jury, find the defendant, Matthew Davenport, to be guilty of the charges of terrorism."

Judge Hennessy pronounced, "You have been found guilty on the charges of terrorism for selling android implants with weapons capabilities to a known terrorist organization. By the authority of the Supreme Court of the North American Union, I hereby sentence you to death by incineration. Your sentence will be carried out one year from today. You will be remanded to a maximum security facility, in isolation, until that time." The judge slammed his gavel down.

The whole courtroom erupted in applause and cheering.

The noise startled Matthew. None of this seemed real. He had heard the juror and the judge, but this was his life. Now it was all being ripped from him. He pleaded with his attorney, "I'm innocent. What do we do now? When do we appeal?"

Matthew's attorney loosened his tie as he threw his last paper into his briefcase. "Matthew, clearly someone powerful wants you to take the fall for this. This case has all the signs of payoffs and coverups at the highest level. They have even turned the public against you. Just look, the jury decided you were guilty in less than an hour. That never happens!" Then he slammed his

briefcase closed. “Honestly, you couldn’t pay me enough money to go to court for you again.” The attorney got up and pushed his chair in. “Sorry man, tough break.” Then he turned and walked out of the courtroom.

The noise in the room seemed deafening to Matthew, with all the reporters and people talking and laughing. For the first time in three days though, no one really seemed to be looking at him.

Out of the crowd, a woman’s voice behind him whispered, “Roland’s been watching. He’s going to find a way to clear your name.”

CHAPTER TWO:

CLANG

MATTHEW KEPT LOOKING forward, but talked out of the side of his mouth so as not to draw attention. “Roland? My son? Is he here?”

The woman touched the side of her glasses. “I’ve got him here, on my uplink.”

Matthew’s neck muscles tensed. “Roland, do not get involved! It’s too dangerous.” He leaned a little closer to the woman, but kept looking straight ahead. “Skylar, don’t you let him go anywhere near this! Whoever did this is too powerful!”

Skylar pulled her brown sun hat down a little tighter. “Roland says he’s not going to lose you too!”

“No! Both of you stay away from this. If you don’t, you’ll put your own lives at risk.”

The hulking bailiff walked over to Matthew and tapped his baton on the desk. “Let’s go.”

Matthew sat for another second while Skylar disappeared into the crowd, then he got up. The last thing in the world that he wanted was for Roland to get mixed up in this mess. He had only known his son for the last seven months.

The bailiff prodded Matthew with his baton. “Move it.”

Matthew took his first step towards the hallway, isolation and ultimately his death sentence. His mind was still reeling from the shock. Questions fired off in his head in rapid succession. *Who could have done this? Why would they have set me up? Who could have this much power?* His stomach churned at the thought of Roland getting pulled into this and ending up in the cell next to him. *Roland, you must get as far away from this as you can!* he

thought. *I've only just gotten to know my son. This can't be happening!*

The bailiff handed Matthew over to the prison transport guards. The armored door to the prison hover van clanged shut along with everything important in his life.

CHAPTER THREE:

CHAMBERS

RETREATING FROM THE media frenzy, Judge Hennessy headed towards his chambers. He stopped outside his door and leaned into the retina security scanner. The red light washed over his eye and then the door to his office clicked open.

He was greeted by the sickly sweet smell of a Cuban cigar. His high-backed leather chair swung around towards him and Vincent Bishop, the CEO of Pinnacle Technology Corporation, propped his expensive leather shoes up on the judge's desk. "Johnny-boy, you've returned from battle. See, it went according to plan."

Judge Hennessy frowned at the uninvited guest. "Vincent? What are you doing here?"

The CEO set his Cuban cigar down. "I came to congratulate you."

Judge Hennessy hung his robe on the wall hanger. "You mean, you came to keep an eye on me."

"See, it wasn't that hard."

The Judge looked Vincent in the eye. "I'm a Justice of the Supreme Court, not a fast food clerk. I just found a man guilty and put him on death row."

"Of course you found him guilty. How couldn't you have, with the jury I gave you?" Vincent picked the Cuban back up. "Anyway, it's over now."

"Until your next favor."

Vincent got up to leave. "I like you better when you need election funds. You're much more pleasant then."

CHAPTER FOUR:

LETTER

SKYLAR EXITED THE courtroom. “I’m headed back,” she said to Roland over the uplink in her glasses. Then she killed the video feed by touching the side of her glasses.

His text flowed across her glasses and then disappeared. “Hurry.”

She arrived at Roland’s house fifteen minutes later. Roland Crane shared the house with his father, and she rented the garage apartment in the back. Skylar went in the front door of the main house and saw Roland pacing back and forth in the living room. Roland was wearing his boxing gloves, and whenever his pacing took him to side of the room where the punching bag was, he would let loose a frenzy of punches and kicks on it.

Roland looked up when Skylar came in. “He’s my dad. I should have been there today!”

Skylar closed the door. “You know your dad asked you not to come. He said that he didn’t want the media to learn he had a son and have you be branded as ‘the son of a traitor.’”

“But I can’t believe they took him away! Less than an hour the jury was gone. Can you believe that?”

“No, that’s almost unheard of!”

Roland gave the bag a hard left hook. “Deathrow? C’mon. You’ve got to be kidding me.” Two right jabs. “It was just seventy-two hours ago that he was arrested. I’ve heard of these speed trials before, but I never imagined it would happen to my own family. It’s not like I have much family left. Lost my mom to cancer, what, barely seven months ago?”

Skylar nodded and put her video glasses in their case and

put her regular glasses back on. "Death by incineration? That's only reserved for the worst of the worst. Remember that serial killer in the news a few months ago? Well, he got lethal injection. He didn't even get incineration."

Roland paced to the other side of the room. "What are we going to do, Sky? We have to get him out somehow. We have to figure out who did this and expose them!"

Skylar stood behind the punching bag and held it steady. "You heard what your dad said, right?"

Roland took a stance on the other side of the bag. He bounced on his feet a couple times. His clear, blue eyes echoed the pain he felt, but were filled with fury. "Yep, I heard him." Then he pounded away on the bag as hard as he could, yelling all the while.

It took everything Skylar had to keep hold of the bag. "You gonna stay back and keep away? You know it's every bit as dangerous as he said, probably more."

Roland chugged a blue sports drink. He slammed the empty bottle on the counter. "You know I'm not, Sky. I thought I was all alone in the world when my mom died." He gave the punching bag two jabs and an uppercut. "I just got my dad. I'm not going to lose him now!"

"I know you don't want to. I know I couldn't if it were me. But your dad told me to tell you not to."

Roland ran a towel over his face and hair to dry off the sweat. His short brown, hair stood up. "Sky, I'm going to get my dad out and clear his name. I don't care what it takes. You're my best friend, and I need your help."

"Best and only friend. Mr.Davenport was the closest thing to a dad in my life. I really admired him. Of course, I'm in."

Roland managed half a smile.

"You stink. Go shower and I'll pull up everything I can on Mr.Davenport's trial."

Roland looked down at his drenched shirt and then headed towards his room. "Yeah, see what else you can find on that piece of human garbage, Judge Hennessy."

Roland reflected while he was getting showered and

Nano Contestant - Episode 1: Whatever It Takes

dressed. His mother's battle with cancer had come on so quickly. He had been deployed overseas with his unit of the North American Union Marines when he had first gotten the notice. By the time he had been able to get leave, he had only had a week with her before the cancer claimed her.

At the reading of his mother's will, a private letter was given to him by the attorney. His mom had written him about his father. She had always told him that she had conceived through artificial insemination and didn't know who his father was.

She said in her letter, however, that the truth was that she had fallen in love her senior year in college with Matthew Davenport. She had loved him very much, and they had hoped to marry. A few months before their graduation, Matthew was offered a full scholarship to MIT's advanced robotics graduate program.

She didn't want to hold Matthew back from such an opportunity. She knew, the moment he found out about the baby, he would have left school to get a full-time job, and he never would have gone on to MIT.

His mother broke off the engagement, and never told Matthew about their child. She said she knew that Matthew was a brilliant man and that someday he would change the world with his science.

It was hard for Roland to be mad at his mom after losing her, but it had been such a shock. He had needed answers.

The next week, Roland had taken leave from the NAU Ontario Marine base, and searched out his father. First, he had gone to MIT's campus in Massachusetts. From there, he tracked his dad to Redwood City, California. Roland's heart was pounding the evening he had arrived at his father's house.

Roland hadn't been sure what to expect, but he told Matthew about the letter anyway. Matthew had been quiet for a while, just taking in the shocking news. Then he had said that he had always loved Roland's mother, and had been surprised when she had broken off their engagement so quickly.

A month later, Roland had moved into Matthew's house when his enlistment in the Marines had been completed. There, he

had gotten to spend time with his dad and had really gotten to know him. He had also gotten to know the unusual woman who rented Matthew's garage apartment, and now Sky was his best friend.

CHAPTER FIVE:

UNDISCLOSED

SKYLAR WENT INTO the data room. It was her favorite room in the house. She was a hacker to the core but was never really able to afford any of the expensive equipment. Matthew Davenport, on the other hand, had made a lot of money being the chief digital engineer for Pinnacle. He had custom built the most cutting edge hardware for his home lab. The man was a genius, and it showed in every aspect of the data room. She was greeted by Hobbes, the computer system, as soon as she walked in.

“Good afternoon, Skylar,” said Hobbes in a thick British accent.

“Hi, Hobbes.”

“Would you like to see the headlines?” he asked.

“Yes, Hobbes. Put up the top five stations.” Skylar adjusted her hair tie on one of her six braids, each of which, was a different color. She frequently changed her hair to a new color and style.

Five video feeds showed on the wall. They were all covering Matthew’s trial.

“Mute the feeds.”

The video feeds all went silent.

“New post-it board, Hobbes. Left side.”

The left wall turned white. “Post-it board ready, Skylar. What would you like to do?”

“Hobbes, I want all the info you can find on Mr.Davenport’s arrest and trial. Monitor the web for any information coming in about him. Then put all the monitored information together and highlight anything that is related and then sort by source credibility.”

“Of course, Skylar. Detailed or summarized?” Hobbes projected a hologram in the shape of a cylinder on the right side of the room. News articles, pictures and social indicators flowed from the wall into the cylinder. Then they were sorted.

“Summarized for now. We can get details on particular items later. I want an overview as fast as you can, Hobbes.”

“How fast, Skylar?”

“75%, you can pull power from the rest of house if you need to. We will be in here all night.”

“Very good, ma'am. 75% power.” The hologram began to spin faster. The text and pictures became a blur. The lights in the rest of the house dimmed momentarily as the processing power amped up.

Roland came into the data room.

“Good evening, Roland,” said Hobbes.

Roland stood next to Skylar. “What do you have so far?” He eyed the news feeds.

“Looks like Hobbes is almost done with all the chatter about the trial. I figured that was the best place to start.

“Your database is complete, Skylar.” The holographic cylinder changed from a busy blur of information to a steady green.

Skylar motioned for the database, and it moved across the room in front of her. She spun it around a few times to inspect it. “That’s a lot of data.”

Roland looked at the hologram. “Yeah. Let’s start with what we know.”

Skylar gave the hologram a little shove towards the post-it board. “Hobbes, group the data you’ve gathered into related sections so we can see them.”

Hobbes organized the data. “Yes, ma’am. There are three main groups.” The green cylinder broke apart into three sections and went onto the post-it board. “Matthew, Judge Hennessy and Pinnacle.” Head shots of the two men and Pinnacle's logo displayed over their sections.

Skylar pulled up a hologram of several folders. One had a

picture of a skull and crossbones on it. She opened it and began working on its contents in a holographic terminal.

Roland squinted at Skylar's work. "What's that?"

Skylar smiled and continued typing on her holographic keyboard. "This is my own special design. This is a special web crawler to help me find things on the internet that people don't want found."

Roland watched as Skylar's fingers flew over her keyboard. "Good. Get all the dirt you can."

Skylar hit the execute command. Her terminal became a blur as Hobbes took over and began processing the data. Every so often a report would come through and be displayed briefly on the main screen before being moved over to the post-it board.

Roland held up his hand. "Wait a second, Hobbes. Put that last one back up." He pointed to a private email with a spreadsheet attachment.

The email displayed on the large wall, and the spreadsheet was pulled up on the smaller wall to the right.

"Look at this one, Sky." Roland scrolled through to the bottom of the email. "Right here. You just pulled this undisclosed private financial correspondence between Pinnacle's financial department heads. Nice."

Skylar came over to look at the wall more closely. "Yeah, their title says they are in charge of 'Special Projects.' They are talking about moving a lot of money around. These dates are very recently too."

Roland went over to the wall with the spreadsheet. "This one for twenty-five million is marked three days ago, when my dad was arrested. Its memo cell says it was a donation to the 'injured police officer charity.' "

Skylar joined him. "This big one for fifty million is marked for this morning. Whoa, look at who it's for, and on the same day your dad was sentenced!" She tapped the wall to highlight a cell on the spreadsheet.

Roland looked at the highlighted cell. "To Hennessy."

Skylar nodded and pointed to the cell next to Hennessy's

name. “The memo cell says it’s for ‘scholarships for law students.’ Both of these could very well be shell organizations to funnel funds into private, offshore accounts.”

Roland went back to looking at the other spreadsheet entries. “Ok, those two money transfers match the arrest of my father and his sentencing today. Whatever they are covering up must be big. That’s why they needed my dad to take all the blame and any suspicion away from Pinnacle. I bet, if whatever they are covering up came to light, they would lose a lot of business.”

Skylar went back to the spreadsheet too. “Yep. But they would stand to lose a lot more than just their consumer business. They are pretty much the sole supplier of robotics and tech for the North American Union government. They would lose trillions of dollars in government and defense contracts if it came back on them.”

Roland turned towards Skylar. “Sky, I think Pinnacle bought themselves a judge.”

Skylar went back to typing on her holographic keyboard. “Roland, I bet this isn’t the first time either. Just a sec.” Several new emails and reports came up.

Roland went over to look at them. “What are these?”

Skylar swiped her hand and the terminal disappeared. “I widened the search time frame from just Mr.Davenport’s trial to similar trials in the last ten years back to 2104. Looks like I was right too.” She pulled up the city newspaper article from two years ago in 2112. “Look at the headlines - Man sentenced to life in prison. He was a Pinnacle employee who was caught selling android blueprints to the Arabs.” She pulled up another undisclosed financial statement and pointed at the cell.

Roland nodded. “Look at that one, it’s also for twenty-five million.”

Skylar pulled up three more. “Over the last ten years, here are four different cases of Pinnacle employees either going to jail for life or getting the death sentence.” She pulled up Pinnacle’s internal emails and spreadsheets that corresponded with each verdict’s timeframe. “And each one has a large deposit being made

in a judge's account."

Roland looked between the headlines, the spreadsheets and the undisclosed emails from Pinnacle's Special Projects Division. "Looks like each time some employee is being sentenced, a judge is getting a truckload of money. But all four of these are for less than fifty million."

Skylar nodded. "You're right, but none of those trials were as fast as your dad's, and none of them got a one year sentence ending in incineration."

Roland went back to the headlines. "And all those older ones were labeled as corporate espionage or embezzlement. Looks like Pinnacle escalated this time and got my dad on treason."

Skylar stepped back to look at all the documents together. "So, they paid the higher fee and got a faster and more extreme sentence." Skylar swiped her hand through the air next to a section of recent stories about Mr.Davenport's trial. She read off the headlines as she scrolled through them. "Pinnacle says employee acted alone, Pinnacle found blameless in terrorism trial and Pinnacle's business is always above board."

Roland crossed his arms. "Yeah, right." Roland began pacing. "If they are buying verdicts, then could it be that Pinnacle is also actually the one selling android tech to the terrorists?"

Skylar sat down on top of the desk. "Then they made your dad the fall guy, just like those other guys?"

Roland stopped pacing for a moment and threw his hands up in the air. "It makes sense. When you have the kind of money and power that Pinnacle has, you can buy whatever you want. Judge, jury and verdict are all just line items on their expense report."

Skylar crossed her arms. "If it is Pinnacle, what can we possibly do about it?"

"I'd have to get close enough to them to find the evidence and then expose them."

Skylar hopped off the desk and walked over to Roland. "If they caught you looking into it, then they would come after you, like they came after your father. Any ideas how to do it?"

“In order for me to even get close, they would have to not suspect me in any way. They definitely cannot connect me to my dad, but, hopefully, with different last names and no records connecting us, maybe I can find a way.” Roland looked at the video feeds. One had an advertisement for Pinnacle. “Wait, look at that advertisement.” Roland pointed. “Hobbes, full screen that feed with the Pinnacle ad and unmute.”

The whole wall came alive with Pinnacle's advertisement for their bi-annual Tech Games. The announcer's voice boomed into the data room. “This year's Tech Games will be even bigger than ever before! Watch as digital humans are pitted against hybrid humans battling it out in speed races, hand to hand combat and mind games! The grand prize has been doubled for this season's Tech Games to one hundred million dollars! During the event, all contestants will stay at our luxury Tech Games mansion on Pinnacle's private property and tour Pinnacle's headquarters to see the latest tech.”

Roland watched the advertisement for another few seconds. He pointed at the ad. “What about this? Could this be it? Maybe that's how I could get close to Pinnacle. I wonder if I could be a contestant in the Tech Games? While I'm at their headquarters, maybe I could snoop around in between the games to find the evidence I would need.”

Skyler shook her head. “No, I don't think so. You don't qualify to be in the games. “You've either got to be a digital, you know, a human with digital DNA, or a hybrid, which is a human with an android implant, like a robotic arm, or you would need a nanotech enhancement.”

“Well, could you make me into one of those, Sky?”

“Digital DNA is out, because you have to be genetically modified at conception. And I don't think you'd like becoming a hybrid, because you would have to cut off one of your arms or legs. Maybe, and I mean a big maybe, there's a small chance with the nanotech.”

“How small?”

“Look, nanotech is a very unpredictable science. In the

Nano Contestant - Episode 1: Whatever It Takes

twenty-five year history of the games, there have only ever been five contestants that have tried it. All five of them died. Nobody's tried it in the last twenty years. The games are dangerous enough even without untested tech."

"I've got to try it. This would be the perfect cover."

"But..."

"Sky, I've got to at least try it. Let's find out what it would take to submit me as a contestant."

CHAPTER SIX:

NANO

“SKY, I KNOW you said the chance of me getting the nanotech to work was very slim, but I think I might have an idea that might give us a leg up.”

“Good. Let’s hear it, because right now we got nothing.”

“Ok, so about a month ago, my dad and I were talking about a new project he was working on, a nanotech project.”

“You mean, at Pinnacle, he was working on a nanotechnology project?”

“No, no, this was his own personal project.” Roland pointed his fingers towards the floor. “He was working on it here, at home.”

“Are you sure? Because if it was for Pinnacle, they’d have all the rights to it, and we’d never be able to use it.”

“Yeah, that’s one of the things he was making a big deal about. He was saying that he had done all the research during his off time, and he had never even brought it up at work, because he didn’t want them to be able to take any of it away from him.”

Skylar jumped up and walked over next to Roland. “Well, let’s see it!”

“Ok, let’s look through Hobbes’ files.” Roland swiped his hand through the air to clear the screen on the wall. “Hobbes, show all the projects that my dad has been working on over the last year.”

The wall changed to show a list of projects. Then they blurred out and a password warning came up. “I have the list, sir, but you’ll need to put in a password to open them.”

Skylar squinted at the blurred wall, trying to see some of

the file names. “Well, what’s the password, Roland? Let’s start going through these.”

“Dad encrypted it with a DNA lock. It was coded through his blood.”

There was a whirring noise coming from the desk. Then a panel on the top of the desk raised up and slid to the side. “I’m ready to accept your password now, sir.”

Roland walked over to the desk. “He coded my DNA into the system too.” He put his right thumb on the top of the glass.

Skylar bent down to look at the panel. “Mr.Davenport was never one for sparing expenses. I’ve only ever read about DNA level encryption.”

There was an audible click sound. Roland winced and held up his thumb. A single bead of blood had formed. “Not when it comes to security anyway.”

“Thank you, sir. I am running your DNA against the encryption.”

A hologram of a DNA helix appeared in the middle of the room. It began to spin faster and faster. Small sections of the helix were breaking off and flying towards the main wall. On the main wall, they were fitting together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. It only took about ten seconds to work through the entire helix. The jigsaw puzzle was in a rectangular shape. It flashed green, and then the encryption lock was removed.

“Mr.Davenport’s files have been successfully unlocked, sir.”

All of Matthew’s files and folders came into focus.

Skylar was excited. She began moving through the folders. “This stuff is amazing!” She scanned through each one briefly and then would swipe her hand through the air to go to the next one.

Roland plopped down onto the small leather sofa that was near the wall. “C’mon dad, get me into the games!”

Skylar stopped flipping through the folders and just began reading one of them. “Roland, this is it!” She filled the wall with the project summary document. “This is exactly what we need. Tiny nanobots that are made from hydrogen and oxygen

molecules.”

“What? So, it’s nanotech made from water?”

“Well, yeah, I guess you could think of it like that. Think of it more like super-charged water with great capabilities and limitless potential.”

“Well, will it help us with the Tech Games?”

Skylar ignored him for a moment while she scrolled through the document. “Yes, I think it will. Basically, the molecules are charged up in a lab, and their electrons are synchronized. That’s the key here. The electron orbits must be exactly the same in order for us to be able to control them.”

“And how does that help us?”

“Still reading, hold on.” Skylar scrolled down a few more paragraphs. “Yeah, this is good. It looks like once the sync has happened, then the nanobots should be able to strengthen muscles, increase energy, maximize oxygen levels, reduce recovery times, control temperature levels and who knows what else? So, yeah, in theory, you could be faster and stronger.”

“But Sky, is it enough to be *competitive*?”

“Not sure yet. Still reading. Go find out the times of other Tech Games contestants, so we have an idea what we are looking at.”

Roland stepped over to the side screen and began checking out past contestants.

Skylar continued reading and looking at holographic lab experiments.

“Ok, so the race is a double marathon, making it 52.4 miles. The fastest time is about three hours. The slowest time that still qualified was seven hours.”

Skylar looked over at him. “Seven hours? Regular humans have been running double marathons in five hours since 2014. Why would it take a human with speed tech two hours longer?”

Roland pulled up a holographic map of the course from one of the past games. He let out a low whistle while he watched as the track was highlighted through the map. “It looks like the course is extremely rough: mountains, rivers, sand and ice.”

“I see.” Skylar went back to her reading. “Roland, your dad’s tech would actually put you in a completely new category.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, there’s the digitals, the hybrids and the nanotechs, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, all other nanotech was made with some kind of silicon or carbon material. What your dad has created here would be completely organic, just oxygen and hydrogen.”

“I remember him saying something about it being organic nanotech.”

“Roland, this is a big deal. This has never been done before. No wonder your dad wanted to keep this a secret from Pinnacle. This could be worth billions of dollars, if it were sold.”

“He didn’t want to sell it. He wanted to make it freely available to everyone, like an open source license or something.”

“Open source nanotech? That is definitely revolutionary. Something like this could make Pinnacle’s business nearly obsolete.”

“Good. All the more reason to do this.”

CHAPTER SEVEN:

PROCEDURE

SKYLAR WAS QUIET as she read through Matthew's notes. Suddenly, she clamped her hand over mouth and let out a groan.

"What is it, Sky?"

"Roland, I don't think this is going to work."

"What do you mean?"

"I just read over the installation procedure, and I don't think it's something we could do."

"Sky, you know I don't care what it takes."

"Well, you haven't seen *this!*" She swiped her hand through a few pages. Then she launched a hologram recording. "This is a simulation to show how the nanotech must be installed. Hobbes, walk us through it."

"Yes, ma'am." The hologram showed a human head. "Organic Nanobot installation. Prerequisites. The subject must not undergo any kind of anesthesia for this procedure. The anesthesia will interfere with the nanobots being properly placed and will have an adverse effect on both the nanobots and the subject's body."

"Roland..."

Roland crossed his arms as he watched the hologram. "Shh, let me watch."

The hologram zoomed into a closeup of the human eyeball. "Step one, the eyeball must be secured so that it does not move during the procedure." The hologram showed a robotic arm as two small flat mechanized pieces slid underneath the upper and lower eyelids. Then they pulled the eyeball slightly towards the arm.

Roland grimaced.

“Step two, after the eyeball has been secured, a delivery needle must be readied for insertion to the retina.” The hologram displayed a second robotic arm with a syringe attached at the end of it. It slowly moved towards the center of the eyeball. “With the eyeball pulled taut, the delivery needle must be inserted all the way through the eyeball to the optic nerve.”

Skylar bit her bottom lip and squinted at the grisly hologram.

“Step three, during the delivery, the patient must remain absolutely still or risk permanent damage to his sight. Once the needle is touching the optic nerve, the delivery process may begin. The syringe must deliver at a slow pace in order to not overwhelm the optic nerve. Delivery rate should not exceed one hundred milligrams per minute.” In the hologram, the plunger on the syringe slowly pushed out the nanotech delivery solution.

“Sky, how many milligrams would I need?”

Skylar looked through the notes. “Says the dose is done by subject weight at one hundred milligrams per fifty pounds of body weight. So, if you are about two hundred pounds, you would need four hundred milligrams.”

“So, I would have to sit perfectly still for four minutes while this thing squeezed nanobots into my optic nerve?”

Skylar nodded.

“Step four, the delivery needle must be retracted.” The needle pulled out of the hologram’s eyeball. Step five, the nanobots will need to be jumpstarted and the subject’s heart must be sync’d with the electronic signature of the nanobots.” The hologram showed the subject laying on his back and being shocked with a device.

Roland pointed at the defibrillator. “What’s that?”

“That’s a defibrillator, sir. They were commonly used until around 2030 when they were replaced by medical robotic surge devices that allowed for a greater regulation of voltage.”

“Roland, you have to get jumpstarted after you have had a needle in your eye! Those defibrillators are old tech. They haven’t

Nano Contestant - Episode 1: Whatever It Takes

been used in eighty years. I'm not going to let you do this. We will find another way. ”

“Sky, we both know there's not another way. All the other nanotech options are way worse.”

Skylar sighed and looked down at the floor. “I don't want you to get hurt.”

“I'm not going to. I trust my dad's tech. If he chose to power it with eighty year old tech, I'm sure he had a good reason. Find an optics lab that can do the procedure.”

“Ok, I'll see if I can find one that won't ask too many questions.”

CHAPTER EIGHT:

UNDOCUMENTED

SKYLAR PUT DOWN her headset and shook her head at Roland. “They won’t do it either.”

“Well, that’s ten Optics labs or surgical centers that you’ve called.”

“They won’t let us in for an undocumented procedure.” Skylar leaned back in her chair and stretched her arms.

“Maybe we are looking in the wrong place, Sky.”

“What do you mean? These are all places that do optics work.”

“Yeah, but they do *documented* optics work. Maybe we need to be looking for a place that doesn’t care about whether or not it is a documented procedure.” Roland swiped his hand in front of him. A hologram of a keyboard appeared beneath his fingers. He began typing in the air. “Ok, here’s a place: *Ivan’s Optics: Repairs and Implants*.”

“Ivan’s? Roland, be serious. We are talking about your sight here.” Skylar came over and stood next to Roland to get a better look at the results on the wall. “Their site doesn’t even say they do surgeries or procedures.”

“That’s why this is going to work. A surgery is medical. This Ivan guy is doing repairs and implants. He’s working on the gear, not the medical side.”

Skylar pulled up a map to find Ivan’s. “Roland, this is over in the ghetto Russian warehouse district. That’s not safe.”

“Found several forum posts about Ivan’s. Says he has done some good work with android optic installation and some other things.”

Skylar rolled her eyes. “Wonderful.”

“Sky, hand me the headset. I’m going to call him.” Roland adjusted the headset for his head. “How long do you think it will take to get the nanotech ready for the procedure?”

“Well, your dad’s notes say about half a day.”

Roland nodded and crossed his arms as he waited for the call to go through.

“Ivan’s Optics,” said the gruff voice that was thick with a Russian accent. Skylar could hear him clearly even through Roland’s headset.

Roland told him his name and gave him a quick rundown of what they wanted.

“Roland. Da. I do that. I have equipment. Don’t you worry. You trust Ivan!”

Roland asked if Ivan had a defibrillator.

“Da! You not worry though. Ivan not let paying customers die. You not need ‘fibrillator. You trust Ivan!”

Roland asked how much it was going to cost.

“Ivan give you best deal. Use equipment is thousand dollars, new needles are two hundred. You want new needles right?”

Roland raised an eyebrow. “Yes, I’d like new needles.”

Skylar threw her hands up in the air.

“Da! Good. Sterile important.”

“Finally something we agree on,” whispered Skylar.

“Plus Ivan’s time, costs about fifteen hundred cash. Oh, you want pain meds? That extra. I give you good pain meds.”

“No, I won’t need them.”

“Da! Good. You use Vodka, like me! Cheaper! Vodka better than pain meds anyway.”

“No, that’s ok. Fifteen hundred dollars cash? Sounds good. How about tomorrow afternoon at two? Make sure you have the defibrillator charged and ready.”

“Da! Tomorrow at two. Ivan will be ready. You trust Ivan and not need ‘fibrillator, but I have it ready for you.”

Roland hung up and let out a low whistle. “You hear all

Nano Contestant - Episode 1: Whatever It Takes

that? Tomorrow at two at Ivan's."

Skylar crossed her arms. "Oh, I heard every word. I think you're completely insane for considering this."

"Ivan's all we got. So you better get working on getting the nanotech delivery solution ready."

Skylar turned to go.

Roland grabbed her shoulder. "Hey, wait a minute."

Skylar faced Roland. "What?"

Roland's face was serious. "Promise me that you won't tell anyone about my dad or our plan."

Skylar nodded. "I promise."

"I know we'll have to talk about our specific plans later on, just make sure no one else is around."

"Roland, you don't have to worry. I know what's at stake. I'm not going to say anything."

Roland relaxed a little. "Thanks."

CHAPTER NINE:

TWO

SKYLAR AND ROLAND took a cab over to the Russian warehouse district where Ivan's Optics was located.

The neighborhood took a dive fast just as soon as they passed the first warehouse. Graffiti covered nearly every wall. Rough looking dock workers loaded and unloaded hover cargo carriers. Most were burly and covered in tattoos. All looked like they were in desperate need of a bath, haircut and a shave.

They passed an alleyway where the police lights were flashing, and the police were arresting a drug dealer.

Finally, they pulled up in front of a dilapidated warehouse that had slightly less graffiti on it than the ones surrounding it. A fluorescent sign above the dock entrance said *Ivan's* in bright red letters.

Small bits of broken glass and debris littered the walkway up to the entrance.

"Roland, we can still go back home."

Roland got out of the cab and took hold of Skylar's hand and started to pull her out. "C'mon, Sky. Let's go."

The warehouse door rolled up just before they could knock, and they were greeted by Ivan. He was a middle-aged man about six and a half feet tall. His full beard and long hair were streaked with grey. He wore coveralls and had a shop apron covered in stains and grime.

"You Roland?" Ivan wiped his hands on his dirty apron and held out his hand to shake Roland's.

Roland's hand was engulfed as Ivan shook it. "Yeah, I'm Roland. This is my friend, Sky."

Skylar gave a wave, but then she hugged her box tightly in order to avoid a grimy handshake.

“She’s a pretty girl. Don’t see many pretty girls down here.” Ivan winked at Skylar.

Roland deflected. “Well, can we see the equipment?”

“Da, Da. Equipment in back. I have clean area.”

They followed Ivan to the back of the warehouse, where they could see a well-lit, enclosed area. The windows on the side showed a room that looked very out of place in the warehouse. It was bright, clean and well outfitted with optics equipment.

“Da, you are surprised, yes?” Ivan laughed heartily.

“Yes, very surprised,” said Skylar.

Roland turned towards Ivan. “Let’s go over the procedure again.”

Skylar watched as Roland went through each step, and Ivan nodded frequently.

“Da. We ready. You leave shoes outside clean room and go in and wait for me. I change clothes.”

Roland and Skylar left their shoes and went inside to the clean room. The patient’s chair was purely one of functionality, not amenity. It was perfectly L-shaped and had three restraints rather than cushions.

Roland sat down. “Comfy.”

Skylar eyed the stiff looking chair. “Hey, this was all your idea.” She set her container on the table.

Ivan returned. He was wearing hospital scrubs. His hair was pulled back in a pony tail. He set an old defibrillator down on the floor next to the operating table. “I check ‘fibrillator this morning. Good charge.” Then he straightened his posture and pretended to be an emergency room doctor. He rubbed the paddles together and then stuck out his arms towards Roland. “Clear!”

Roland put up his hands to stop him. “Not yet! After the procedure!”

Ivan guffawed loudly and put the paddles back onto the device. “I just joking! Funny! Da?”

Skylar crossed her arms. “That wasn’t funny.”

“Da! That very funny! You white as ghost!” Ivan pointed at her. “Pretty girl need to relax.”

Skylar still looked cross. “I’m just fine.”

Ivan turned to Roland. “Her need vodka, then her relax. Ok, You ready? Buckle all three seat belts.”

“Ok.” Roland buckled the belt around his waist and his chest. Skylar buckled the last one which pinned his arms to his body and the chair.

Ivan came over to inspect the buckles. “These need to be tighter.” Before Skylar or Roland could respond, he grabbed the tail end of each buckle and yanked even tighter. Roland’s shoulders turned white as the circulation was cut to a minimum.

Skylar took a step towards Roland. “Roland, are you ok?”

Roland wheezed a little. “It’s hard to breathe.”

“Hard to breathe?” Ivan clapped his hands. “Da! That perfect. You not want to move during procedure.”

Skylar eyed Ivan suspiciously but stepped back.

Ivan moved quickly to set up his equipment. He performed each step confidently, never wasting an ounce of effort. He mounted a brace on the back of the L-shaped chair, which then extended over Roland’s head and was supported on Roland’s shoulders. He extended leather straps down from the top of the brace that buckled under Roland’s chin. “These make sure your head not move during procedure. You move, you go blind, Da?”

“Mm-hmm,” was all Roland could get out.

Ivan looked at the restraint settings carefully. “Can you move now?”

“No,” Roland said through clenched teeth.”

“Ok, we make a little tighter just to be sure, Da?” Ivan cranked each of the straps down one more notch. Roland’s face was scrunched together from the straps. Ivan looked the straps over again, but this time he smiled. “Da! Much better. Ivan make sure you not move now. Ivan always take good care of paying customers.”

Skylar grimaced as she surveyed Roland’s restraints.

“Ok, we almost ready!” Ivan set a large robotic arm on the

table across from Roland. He extended the clamps from the base and cranked them down onto the table. He gave it a test shove to make sure it was secure. It didn't budge. Next, he hooked up two wires to Roland's neck.

Skylar pointed to the wires. "What are those for?"

"Vitals. Wires monitor vital signs." Ivan turned towards the blank wall of the room and barked several commands in Russian to his computer system. There were two short beeps and then the center of the wall showed a camera view that was attached to the end of the robotic arm. All around the video feed were readouts showing Roland's heart rate, blood pressure, body electrical conductivity and several other signals.

"Ok, where is serum you want delivered?"

Skylar opened the container on the table. "Right here. He needs four hundred milligrams. It has to be delivered at a rate of one hundred milligrams per minute."

Ivan took out a syringe package and held it up for Skylar and Roland to see. "See? You pay for new needle. Ivan delivered. You always trust Ivan!"

Skylar looked at the package they had paid an extra two hundred dollars for. She wasn't sure what Ivan's alternative to the sterile syringe was or that she even wanted to know, but she did feel it was money well spent.

Ivan put on a pair of latex gloves and then attached the needle to the end of the robotic arm. Then he went over to his keyboard and hit a few keystrokes. The robotic arm beeped and then rotated towards the container. "Move container next to robotic arm."

Skylar did as he asked. "Ok."

Ivan gave out some more commands in Russian. The robotic arm lowered the syringe into the liquid and then began to pull the thick clear liquid up into the syringe. "Ok! I put five hundred milligrams into syringe, but we only give Roland four hundred milligrams, ok?" Ivan winked at Skylar. "Ivan always prepared."

Skylar glared back at him.

Nano Contestant - Episode 1: Whatever It Takes

Ivan's thunderous laugh echoed around the small room. "Now, we are ready? Da?"

"Yes, Ivan. We're ready. Go ahead."

Roland's red face grunted.

Then Ivan produced a shot glass and filled it with vodka.

Skylar looked shocked. "You're not going to drink alcohol before Roland's procedure, are you?"

Ivan grinned and then downed the vodka. "Russians always work better when drinking vodka." Ivan poured a second shot of vodka and moved it to the other side of the table. "That one to drink if procedure is a success!"

Skylar still looked stunned.

"Pretty Girl, you not need to worry. Ivan never miss vodka after procedure. Always success!" Then Ivan barked a bunch of commands in Russian. A spotlight shown down on Roland's face. The other lights in the room dimmed. The robotic arm snapped to attention and then began making a series of adjustments to line up the needle with Roland's tiny pupil. The pneumatics of the arm hissed as air was pushed from them. The gears whirled and made grinding noises as the precision instrument calibrated itself for entry into Roland's optic system. Then the machine went silent.

Ivan took off his latex gloves and threw them in the waste basket. "Ok, shh! Ivan requires absolute silence." He pulled on some thin black gloves and put on a helmet that covered his eyes and ears. "This very delicate work. Ivan uses immersion reality to give best control. You watch me on other screen." Then he barked a few more commands in Russian.

Skylar was familiar with immersion reality tech. Ivan's helmet and gloves completely immersed him into the world he was working in. He would now be functioning as though *he was* the tip of the needle. The robotic arm would be following Ivan's movements, but on a micro scale. This pinpoint accuracy would be exactly what was needed for a serum delivery like this.

Roland was right, she thought. This just might work. It was the first time she had allowed herself to think that this whole procedure could actually be a success.

CHAPTER TEN:

FOUR

SKYLAR FELT HELPLESS and frustrated and scared as she looked at Roland. She couldn't imagine what Roland must be feeling.

Ivan bellowed in Russian again. This time, a green holographic sphere, the size of a basketball, appeared at chest level for him. He slowly moved his hands over the ball, like he was rolling it. The robotic arm clanked and whirred in unison, although on a smaller scale. Ivan gave the ball a hard shove and it began to roll quickly, but the robotic arm only moved a centimeter. "Hey, Pretty Girl, you give Roland wooden blocks to hold." He pointed to a shelf on the side of the room.

Skylar got up and grabbed two of the blocks. "Why? What are they for?" They were pieces that had been sawed off the end of a two by four.

Ivan's wide grin looked stranger than usual with his immersion reality helmet on. "He not taking pain meds and no vodka. He will need something to hold on to."

Skylar paused before giving Roland the blocks. "I'll hold his hand."

Ivan guffawed. "Pretty Girl, he will break your hand, da? Better he hold onto blocks when pain gets bad."

Skylar put a wooden block into each of Roland's hands.

Roland wheezed and then mumbled something unintelligible.

Ivan rolled his sphere a few inches to the right. "Ok. Ready, da?" The wall screen showed the needle that was pointed directly at the center of Roland's right pupil.

Skylar bit her fingernail. "Ok."

Roland mumbled again. He was staring straight ahead, but he couldn't see the needle because it was too close.

Ivan chuckled. "Roland, listen. Ivan has three levels of pain. You count on fingers and Pretty Girl will tell me. That way I know if you need to rest. One finger means pain is good, make you feel alive. Two fingers means pain is bad and you wish you were dead." Ivan rolled his sphere a little to the left.

Skylar crossed her arms. "What is number three?"

Ivan's smile returned in full force. "Three fingers means you wish Ivan was dead."

Roland mumbled. "Mm-hmm."

Ivan's bellowing laugh followed and echoed around the room. "Da! Now we begin!"

Skylar stepped a little closer to watch.

Ivan barked a few more commands in Russian. The robotic arm retracted the needle back into its framework. Two small flat metal pieces extended from the end of the arm. The ends were coated in silicone. "First, we secure the eyeball, so it not move. These are my spatulas." Ivan expertly spun and rotated his holographic sphere and the spatulas mimicked his movements. They slid underneath the top and bottom eyelids at the same time.

Roland grunted.

"Now, I pull eyeball tight. Roland, you not going to like this." Ivan's fingers danced around the ball, which would light up with each touch. "My spatulas are sliding around the top of your eyeball, so I can grip it from behind. Also keep you from blinking."

Roland's breathing was short and fast as he anticipated the pain.

"You breathe slow, da? Take three deep breaths."

Roland started breathing more slowly.

"Easy, da? Ok, now you take deep breath. You breathe out slowly while I pull eyeball into locked place, da?"

Roland took a deep breath in slowly through his nose.

Skylar did too.

“You breathe out now, da?” Ivan pushed his hands inside the green hologram and grabbed what looked like two bars and began to pull them towards the outside of the sphere.

Roland began to slowly exhale, not sure what to expect. Then, he felt it. The spatulas slowly pulled his eyeball forward. Extending it just past the edge of his skull. He grunted and groaned. The nerves behind his eyeball were being pulled tight. It was the kind of feeling that made the rest of his skin crawl. He broke out in a cold sweat. He gripped his wooden block hard and extended his index finger.

Skylar had been watching Roland’s hands. “Ivan, he’s holding up one finger.”

“Da! Very good. That means he is alive.”

Skylar didn’t look convinced.

Ivan pulled his hands out of the sphere and began rolling the ball again. The needle extended from its position within the framework towards Roland’s pupil. He stopped it just short of the entry point. “Roland, I have the needle just in front of your eyeball now.”

Roland grunted and continued exhaling slowly.

“I must go in very slowly, or I will risk damaging your sight, da? You must be absolutely still. No matter what, you not move. You continue to breathe very deep and slow. You think about something else.” Ivan turned his head slightly towards Skylar. “Pretty Girl, you come over here and help him. You tell him how to breathe. Him need to hear something other than the pain he feels, but don’t get in the way, da?”

Skylar moved next to Roland. “I’m here, Roland.”

Roland grunted. “Mm-hmm.”

Ivan rolled his ball forward. “Ok, Roland. You take nice deep breath and hold it.”

Roland filled his lungs as much as his restraints would allow him. He could see the blurry figure of Skylar out of his left eye. Out of his right eye, all he could see was the large grey blob that he knew to be the needle.

“Roland, I go forward only when you are breathing out.

Then I stop and you rest, da? Exhale now and listen to Pretty Girl.”

Roland began to exhale.

Ivan rolled his green holographic ball forward.

Skylar tried to look encouraging. “That’s it, Roland. Keep breathing out. You got this.”

Then Roland felt a searing pain as the needle began to press against his cornea. He groaned, but he didn’t move. The sound of his own heartbeat banged loudly in his head.

Skylar could see the slight indentation that the needle was making against the cornea. Her stomach churned, and she swallowed hard. She had to be strong for Roland. “Exhale slowly, Roland. You’re doing good.” She looked at Roland’s hands. His knuckles were white as he gripped the wooden blocks.

Ivan rotated his ball slightly left and then right. Then he rolled it forward with a jerk.

Roland felt the needle breach his cornea. He felt like every nerve in his body was in white hot pain. He kept trying to look at Skylar with his left eye. It was hard to see anything. Her words sounded like they were a long way off. He focused on them and then he was able to hear her. She was saying to breathe in. He took a deep breath in.

Ivan stopped rolling the ball. “Needle is in. Maybe the rest not hurt so bad. Try to relax, da? If you start seeing black, you tell us. We not want you pass out, because then we have to start over, da?”

Roland grunted. He decided right there that starting over was not an option. *Don’t pass out!* he commanded himself. He heard Skylar again. Deep breath and exhale.

Ivan began rolling the ball again. “Ok, we are coming up on pupil.” He kept rolling.

Roland could feel the needle as it darted through his pupil. *More pain? Ok, stack it on top of the rest. Let’s go,* he thought. The movement stung though. He held out one finger again.

Skylar turned her head towards Ivan. “He’s at pain level one again.” She turned back towards Roland. “Good. Now breathe in. Relax.”

Ivan stopped the ball. “We are through the pupil and into the vitreous gel now. This part like jelly on toast.” Then he turned his head to look at the giant wall screen. “Hmm.” Ivan rotated the ball slightly to the left.

Skylar looked at the wall screen also. “What is it, Ivan?”

“Dis not good.”

“What isn’t good? What’s wrong?”

Roland grunted and forcefully regulated his breathing.

“Optic nerve should be straight back from pupil, but Roland’s is raised up.”

“What does that mean, Ivan?”

Ivan got back in position. “Means Ivan have to bend needle. Needle have to curve from current position to hit target. Roland, Ivan tell you about three pain levels, da?”

Roland grunted.

“To curve the needle inside the eyeball jelly, you are going to level four.”

Skylar whipped around towards Ivan. “What? Can he even survive that? Has anybody ever been to level four?”

Ivan’s fingers danced over the ball as he input the new coordinates and course corrections. “Only one, Pretty Girl. Me. I do it with no pain meds and no vodka. I remove tumor in my eyeball by myself.”

Roland groaned.

“Roland can do it. He very strong. You help him. Help him breathe deep and slow.”

Skylar steadied her voice. She knew Roland needed to hear strength and be reminded why he was doing this. She turned back to him. “Roland. Listen to me. You can do this. You are strong. I will help you. You said you were willing to do whatever it takes. Well, *this* is what it takes.”

Roland took in some deep breaths. He cleared his mind briefly of all the pain and focused on his dad.

Skylar wanted to give as much strength as she could to Roland. “Deep breath in now.”

Roland filled his lungs.

Nano Contestant - Episode 1: Whatever It Takes

Ivan began rolling the ball sideways. The wall screen showed the needle actually bending up towards the optic nerve.

“Breathe out now, slowly.”

Roland began to slowly exhale. His nerves were already raw from the earlier pain. Waves of pain jackhammered through his skull, radiating outwards from his eye sockets down to his toes.

“Don’t think about the pain, Roland. Just listen to my voice. Remember why you are here!”

Still exhaling slowly, Roland extended two of his fingers.

“Ivan, he’s at pain level two.”

Ivan paused. “Catch your breath, Roland. Then we have to keep going.”

Skylar’s words were slow to reach Roland’s brain, but he finally heard her. He forced himself to remember. Remembering shifted the pain out of focus and brought him the distraction he needed. He focused to take two short breaths and then grunted to go on. He started to exhale again.

Ivan rolled the ball forward again, rotating it as he went.

Roland thought about Pinnacle and his blood began to boil. He began sweating all over again. With each turn of Ivan’s ball, Roland could feel the needle curving like a rat’s tail. His stomach churned as it fought against the tidal wave of pain rushing throughout his body. He extended a third finger.

“Level three, Ivan.”

Ivan stopped rolling the ball. “Rest for a second, Roland. We are almost there. I’m about to hit the optic nerve.

Roland wheezed through his nose. The pain was making the room spin. He drew in a couple of sharp breaths and then forced himself to take a slow deep one. The air in his lungs felt good. His body greedily devoured the oxygen. An image of his father being led out of the courtroom flashed through his mind. Roland knew he couldn’t let his father die. He grunted to let them know he was ready. He steeled himself and began to exhale.

Ivan began rolling his ball forward again. “I reach optic nerve in 3.. 2.. 1.. Target reached!”

Nothing Roland could have done would have prepared him

for the absolute shock of the needle lodging into his optic nerve. He yelled through clenched teeth. Every muscle in his face wrenched itself tight in an involuntary reflex reaction to the pain. Roland strained against all his restraints. His peripheral vision went dark as tunnel vision set in. The darkness edged its way in to offer Roland a sweet release from the pain. Roland squeezed every last ounce of strength he had to fight it.

Skylar watched Roland as the excruciating pain began to overwhelm him. She could see every muscle in his body pulled tight. Skylar heard a loud popping noise. She looked in disbelief at Roland's right hand. He had snapped the wooden block in half!

Ivan stopped rolling his ball. "He is at level four now. Get him to breathe now, or he will pass out!"

Skylar got her face as close as she dared to Roland's and began shouting his name and yelling for him to breathe.

"Pretty Girl, give him oxygen now! O2 mask on back of chair!"

Roland's left eye began to twitch. He felt himself going towards the darkness and release. Then he heard a sound from far off. Someone was calling his name. It was Skylar! She was telling him to breathe deep. He forced himself to focus on the sound and then he felt something touch his nose. He began to inhale. The air was different. It was cold and crisp. The darkness began to recede. It was gone after a few more breaths. He could see a blurry outline of Skylar's face with his left eye. Roland grunted.

Ivan lifted the helmet briefly. "Roland is ok, da? Good. I hope you not pass out. Ivan not want to start over. Ivan is tired."

Roland managed a growl in response.

"Ok, we make delivery now, da?" Ivan pulled his helmet back down.

Roland took in a deep breath, not sure what to expect after his last experience.

Skylar watched as the plunger on the syringe began to slowly move forward.

Ivan pushed his hands inside his holographic ball again and began moving his fingers around to configure the delivery. The

hologram lit up from the inside wherever he touched it. “Ok, delivery has begun. Breathe slow and deep, Roland.”

Roland could feel the thick liquid begin to ooze into his eye ball and onto the optic nerve. At first it felt cold, which was a welcome change after the fiery hell he had just been through. He could feel goosebumps on his arms and legs. Roland concentrated on his breathing. The cold flow of the delivery agent made the nerves in his head tingle down to his spinal column. He listened to Skylar as she coached him along.

“You’re doing good, Roland. Nice, deep breaths.”

But the more of the agent that was delivered, the worse it began to feel. Roland’s nerves were already ragged from the needle being inserted. He could hear the machine making tiny pumping noises every second or two. It seemed that a swarm of bees had been released inside his head. With each pumping noise, it seemed that a few more bees were stinging his optic nerve. Each one leaving its harpoon behind to fester and intensify the pain of the next one. Roland held out one finger.

Ivan slowly rolled the green ball forward. “We have reached one minute mark. You only have three minutes left!”

Skylar watched Roland’s face. His eye was not focusing on her. He seemed less responsive. “He’s back at pain level one, Ivan.”

“You must keep talking to him. Do not let him pass out!”

Skylar moved her face right in front of Roland’s. She talked louder to him, hoping to drown out the machine noises and the pain he was in.

Roland pulled in a deep breath of air. It even hurt to breathe now. He fought off the blackness that began to set in around the edges of his vision again. He stared back at Skylar. *Had she moved closer?* he thought. He knew he must stay ahead of the pain; he must not lose control. Roland focused on Skylar’s face. She was smiling, but she looked worried.

Ivan pressed a section on the inside of the holographic ball and barked out some Russian commands to his system. “I have engaged autopilot for rest of delivery.” He pulled his hands out of

the ball and raised his helmet. The ball continued to move forward on its own and the arm kept pumping away. Ivan walked over to Roland. “You are halfway done!”

Roland managed a grunt in response.

“Keep breathing slow and deep. You listen to Pretty Girl here.”

The pain in Roland’s head began to feel different. The bees and their stingers were still present, but he also began to feel pressure building up inside his head. Each pump no longer brought more bees, but instead felt as though his head was completely full and more of the delivery agent was being forced in. The pressure made his head feel like it was going to explode. The pain shot up exponentially. Roland held out three fingers.

“Ivan, he’s at pain level three! How much longer?”

Ivan looked over at the big wall screen. “Forty-five more seconds!”

Skylar put the oxygen mask over Roland’s nose again. “Deep breath, Roland. You are almost there! Stay with me.”

Roland was fighting the blackness that now covered more than half of his vision. The oxygen helped a little. He was able to get a clear view for at least a breath or two and then the blackness returned with a vengeance. Roland’s eye was open, but he couldn’t see anything. The pain clouded over everything. He listened to the voices.

Ivan’s deep gravelly voice was counting down. “Ten, nine, eight...”

It was Skylar’s voice, though, that pulled him through. He could hear her pleading tone as she coached him through another breath. “Last breath in...”

Roland began to exhale as Ivan finished the countdown. *Three, two, one! I made it!* Roland thought as he heard the pumping noises stop.

Ivan had pushed his helmet up. “Roland, you done now! I give you rest and then we pull the needle out, da?”

Roland grunted and breathed heavily through his nose.

Skylar looked at Roland and let out a sigh.

Nano Contestant - Episode 1: Whatever It Takes

Roland's vision cleared. The pressure in his head began to ease once the pumping stopped.

Ivan pulled his helmet back down. "Now for last part. This not be so bad. Only take about thirty seconds to retract needle, da? Hurt maybe level one, but that easy for you now."

Skylar glanced at Ivan and then turned back to Roland. "You got this, Roland. Think about your dad. You just have a little bit more to go."

Roland thought about his dad. He had to get him out, and this process was going to get him there. He steeled his mind and then gave as confident a grunt as he could muster.

Ivan's fingers began lighting up the inside of the green ball again. "Here we go!" He began rolling the ball back towards himself. The mechanical arm responded in kind.

Roland was completely unprepared for the feeling of the retracting needle. He could feel every millimeter of movement. It almost seemed as though it were pulling the inside of him with it.

Ivan stopped moving his holographic ball. "We are at turn now. You might feel little pain now." He started rolling his ball backwards without waiting for a response.

Skylar tried to offer encouraging words, but it didn't look like Roland could hear her.

Roland was instantly put right back into his nightmarish world of pain. He grunted loudly. Every nerve in him screamed to make it stop. Every muscle in his body was pulled completely taut. He held out three fingers again.

"Ivan, he's at a three!"

Ivan continued rolling the ball backwards. "Almost past curve, Roland. Pretty Girl, you must get him to relax."

Roland moaned through gritted teeth.

Ivan paused and looked over at the wall screen. "That's it. We are past curve now. Only ten seconds and the needle will be out."

The excruciating pain left Roland almost as suddenly as it had arrived. He took in a deep breath and tried to focus. He could feel the last bit of the needle being retracted.

Ivan stopped rolling the ball and lifted his helmet. “Ok, needle is out.” He reached inside the holographic ball and hit a few of the buttons, which lit up. The robotic arm repositioned itself back to its original starting position. It was followed by a whoosh sound as the pneumatics let out their stored air pressure. “Pretty Girl, you get equipment ready to read Roland’s signal. I will help him lie down on table. Time for ‘fibrillator, da?’”

CHAPTER ELEVEN:

JUMP

SKYLAR BEGAN LOOSENING the restraints on Roland's head. "I'll set that up after Roland is out of all this."

Ivan hung his immersion reality helmet on a peg on the wall and walked over to help Roland. "Roland, you did good. See, Ivan always take care of paying customers."

Roland felt the pressure release from his head as the restraints were taken off. Blood began to flow back through all parts of his body again. His pale color began to fade. His fingers and toes tingled.

Ivan pulled a black eye patch from a supply drawer. "You wear eye patch for at least two days, da? And keep eye closed." He carefully fitted the patch over Roland's right eye.

Roland tried to stand. "Ok." He wasn't able to get up.

Ivan easily hoisted Roland up and helped him to the patient table.

Skylar brought the oxygen mask over to him. "I think he should breathe in some straight oxygen while I get set up."

Ivan helped Roland swing his legs up on the table and lay down. "Da. O2 help him recover quicker."

Skylar pulled her computer from her pocket and set it on the metal table on the side of the room. She pushed a button on the top and a three dimensional hologram of a radio tower projected up from it. Skylar waved her hand in front of the projection and a holographic keyboard appeared under her fingers. She typed in a few commands and watched as the script that Matthew had written jumped to life. After a few seconds of code flying by her holographic terminal, it finally stopped. The command prompt

read, “Searching signals...” followed by a blinking cursor. “My equipment is ready, Ivan.”

Ivan set the old defibrillator up next to the table. He had a paddle in each hand. “Roland, remove shirt.”

Roland pulled his shirt off and dropped it on the floor. He groaned as he moved his arms above his head. “Everything hurts!”

Skylar looked over at Roland. The restraints had left imprints on his arms and head. “Roland, your arms... Are you ok?”

“Yeah, I’ll be ok. Let’s get this over with.”

Ivan picked up the defibrillator paddles. “Ok, we are ready for ‘fibrillator, da?” He positioned the paddles on either side of Roland’s chest.

Skylar nodded.

Roland closed both eyes and exhaled. “Ready.”

Ivan smiled wide. “Ivan always want to use ‘fibrillator.”

Skylar took a step forward and held out her hand. “Wait, what? You haven’t used one before?”

Ivan winked at her. “Nope. First time, da?” Then without waiting for any further responses he put both of his thumbs on the paddle’s triggers. “Clear!”

There was a little electronic whining noise and then Roland’s eyes went wide open. His back arched and then he fell back to the table. It felt like he had just been kicked in the chest by a huge Clydesdale horse and then everything went dark and his eyes closed.

Ivan looked over at Skylar. “You get signal?”

Skylar’s eyes were glued to her hologram. “No!” She hit the button to search again. “Nothing!” She looked over at the wall screen that showed Roland’s vitals. His heart was beating irregularly and slowly. And then the heartbeat stopped. “Ivan! His heart has stopped!”

“Ivan never lose customer!” Ivan hit the buttons on the paddles again as he yelled, “Clear!”

Roland’s eyes stayed closed. His back arched again and then smacked down hard on the table.

Ivan and Skylar looked at the heart rate monitor again.

Nothing.

“Ivan, do something! Don’t let him die! We never should have done this!”

“Roland, you wake up!” Ivan hit the buttons for a third time. “Clear!”

The heart rate monitor began to beep again.

Skylar ran over to Roland. “Roland!”

Roland’s chest began moving again. His eyes opened. He gave a slight nod. “Did it work?”

There was a strange two toned beep from Skylar’s computer. She ran back to it. She stared in disbelief at the hologram. The prompt said, “Signal acquired. Running Diagnostics...” The lines below showed all of the different data that was being gathered from Roland’s body. “It’s working!” She ran back to Roland.

Ivan put the defibrillator away. “Ivan did good job, da? Now time for vodka!”

Roland was sitting up putting his shirt back on. “Really? It worked?!”

Skylar scanned through her readouts. “Yes! I’m reading all your vital signs now!” She let out a sigh. “I am so glad this is over!”

Roland gingerly climbed off the table. “Yeah, now the hard part begins.”

Ivan grabbed the small shot glass that had been waiting for him on his supply table and downed it.

CHAPTER TWELVE:

RUN

ROLAND SLEPT MOST of the next two days, but Skylar barely even closed her eyes. She was too excited. She was testing out the new nanotech implanted in Roland's body. She was able to pull information from it even while he slept.

The nanotech was extremely fast. Much faster than any other hardware she had ever used. The nano cells had already begun replicating throughout Roland's body. They inserted themselves into every type of tissue and would instantly communicate with the rest of the nano cells, and in turn, Roland's body.

The results of Skylar's preliminary tests were promising. She had first run some basic calculations to establish a baseline. The nanotech was producing results that were much faster than any currently available digital tech on the market.

Skylar also found the plugins system. Matthew had created the system to be a modular framework so that the software could be built up or taken down without stopping the whole system. One of the plugins he had made was for healing. Skylar loaded the plugin into Roland's system and started running it. She watched as the system began drawing in extra antibodies and repair cells to Roland's eye and nerves. The next plugin she found hooked into Roland's vision and created a video stream.

Roland awoke on the third morning. He felt good. The soreness was gone. He swung out of bed and headed for the kitchen. He

reached up and felt the eye patch still in place. He carefully pulled it off and then slowly opened his eye. It took a second to focus, but then everything seemed normal. He moved his eyeball around and opened and closed it a few times. Nothing hurt. His vision seemed fine. *It's better than fine*, he thought. *Everything seems sharper and clearer. I bet that's the nano*. Roland put some espresso on to brew. "Sky?" There was no answer. He went into the living room and found her asleep on the couch. He went back for the espresso. They both functioned better with caffeine. Roland put his espresso in the freezer. He liked it cold. For Skylar's, he added sweetener and soy milk. He pulled his from the freezer before it froze solid and took them both into the living room. He wafted the hot beverage in front of Skylar's nose.

Her eyes flashed open and were followed with a smile. "Coffee?" She took the cup without waiting for an answer and began to sip it.

Roland threw his head back and chugged his cold espresso. "Good morning, Sky."

Skylar wrinkled her nose as she watched Roland chug the coffee. "The way you drink coffee is such a waste." She shook her head and sighed.

Roland smiled and pretended to eye her cup.

Skylar put a protective hand over her cup. "Nevermind. How do you feel? How's the eye?"

Roland looked at Skylar. "I feel really good. My eye is great." Roland pointed his finger at his head. "I'm ready to see what this thing can do!"

Skylar waved her hand towards the nearby blank wall. "The nano have already been working hard on you." The wall jumped to life and showed all the health and healing data Skylar had been

working on. “See for yourself.”

Roland walked over to the wall and began looking over the data. Skylar explained to him about the healing plugin his father had made and what data was being shown.

Roland stepped back and ran his hands through his hair. “Wow, so the nano speeded up my recovery?”

“Yes, significantly. Once they have replicated fully throughout you, I expect healing to come very quickly.”

Roland went back to the health readout screen and pointed at a number in the top right of the screen. “Whoa, this is really amazing. Is this number the amount of the nanotech cells I have in my body? It says twenty million.”

Skylar sipped her espresso again. “Yep. That’s right. You started with just over a hundred thousand right after the injection. They have replicated to twenty million while you were sleeping. Once the replication is complete, you should have about hundred million nano cells.”

Roland turned to Skylar. “That means I’m only at twenty percent now?”

Skylar smiled back. “Yep. You aren’t even close to being at full capacity yet.”

“So, how do I get the nano cells to replicate?”

“Just like any other cell, they need fuel to grow. Your dad’s notes say that a nanotech subject would have to double his daily calories. I’m guessing that if you are training hard, it may be a lot more calories than that.

Roland headed for his room. “I’m going to get my running shoes. We’ve got to try this out.”

Skylar made some toast for both of them and then went into the data room. “Hey Roland, I also found a plugin to send your vision

as a video feed. Roland followed her into the data room to put his shoes on. “So, can you see what I see then?” He took the toast that Skylar offered him and began crunching away on it.

Skylar also took a bite of her toast and then went and got a strip of black fabric with a communications device sewn into it. “Here put this around your neck. This is a short range comm unit I put together for you. As of right now, the data can only be sent a short distance. I was able to piggyback your nano data over the comm unit’s network. We will find a better solution later.

Roland held his toast in his mouth while he fastened the one inch strip of fabric around his neck. “Test, test, test.”

Skylar put on a headset. “Yeah, I got you and your toast.” She waved her hand and a holographic keyboard appeared under her fingers. She began typing commands into a holographic terminal. Then she swiped her hand from the holographic terminal to the data screen wall. Instantly the wall showed Roland’s view.

Roland finished tying his shoes and then headed for the door. “Here we go!” He took off running out the front door and down the block.

Skylar watched Roland’s video feed on the wall. “It really is like being in your head.”

Roland turned onto the next street. “So, you can still see everything even while I’m running?”

“Yeah, it’s all coming through crystal clear.”

“Sky, can you pull up my heart rate and stuff?”

Skylar typed a command on her keyboard. “Yep, you are about a hundred and twenty beats a minute.”

Roland could feel himself getting into his running rhythm now. It felt good. The last several days had been stressful, and he needed to blow off steam. “Sky, I have an idea. Can you make me see my

heart rate too? You know, like the HUD in a video game?”

“Hold on a sec. I’ll see what I can find.” Skylar checked back over the reference material she had and then looked over the coding. “I think I’ve got an idea that might work.”

Roland left the neighborhood and headed for the wooded running trails. “Ok, do it.”

Skylar began typing furiously. She had pulled up three different holographic terminals and was switching between them regularly. She grabbed sections of code from one terminal and swiped her hand through the air to merge it into the next terminal. “Ok, you should see your heart rate now.”

Roland stopped running. “Sky, I can’t see.”

“What do you mean you can’t see? You mean, like, at all?”

“Yep, like pitch black. I can’t see anything. I’m standing outside the wooded jogging trails.”

“Um, just a sec. I’ll check my code.”

“Ok. Well, hurry up.”

Skylar quickly scanned over the terminals she had pulled up. “I think I found it.”

Roland sat down on the grass. “Still all black over here.”

Skylar quickly opened another holographic terminal and pulled out the offending code and stuck it in the new terminal. “Sorry, I’m still fixing it.” She typed in a few commands to diagnose the problem. She removed one more section of code and ran her new code through a checker. It came out clean. She launched the new code. “How about now?” Roland’s video feed came back up on the data room’s wall.

Roland stood up. “It’s working. I can see again. What happened?”

“I was trying to get the heart rate to overlay your normal

vision. It should work just like editing a video feed, except I accidentally blacked everything out.”

Roland began jogging again. “Ok, well, let’s not do that again.”

“Yeah, I agree. Ok, stop for a sec. I think I have the overlay setup now.”

Roland stopped jogging and grabbed onto a nearby tree. “Hit it.”

Skylar grabbed the new chunk of code she had been working on for the display and moved it to her second holographic terminal. She ran the checker on it, and it came back good.

Roland’s vision blacked out for a second and then came back. This time his heart rate showed right in the middle of his vision. “Sky, I can see my heart rate, but it’s right in the middle of my view. I can only see stuff on the sides of my vision.”

Skylar looked over at Roland’s video feed. A big green *90 bpm* showed right in the center. “That’s easy to fix. Just a second.” She went back to typing again and swiping code between the holographic monitors. “Ok, one more blackout and that should do it.”

Roland’s vision blacked out just as she said and when it came back, a small *82 bpm* showed in the bottom right of his vision. “Much better. I can see everything now, including my heart rate. I’m jogging again.” Roland took off through the winding dirt path.

“I can use the heart rate monitor as a template for anything else you’d like on your head’s up display, or HUD as you like to call it. I think I’ve even got a fix for the blackouts.”

Roland jumped over a fallen tree. “I’d also like speed and distance.”

Skylar went back to her terminals. She made a few copy and pastes and then tweaked her coding just a little. “Speed and

distance, there you go.”

Roland half smiled as he saw a little *8 mph* above his heart rate and a small odometer reading above the speed. “No blackout, Sky, and they both look great.” Roland broke out of the woods and onto a small back country road. He slowed to a walk. “Sky this road is a perfect place for a test run. I’m going to really open it up out here. I want you to capture all the data you can, ok?”

Skylar used both hands to push all the holographic terminals together into one large terminal. “Just a sec. I’m getting set to capture data from your run.” She put in a command which launched her into Roland’s system command center dashboard. The dashboard showed all current vital signs. She tapped several of the holographic buttons and put the system into record mode. “Ready to record.”

“Ok, so what do I need to qualify in the Tech Games race?”

Skylar swiped her hand towards the opposite wall in the data room and then entered a search command. All the race data displayed on the wall. “It’s a double marathon, so 52.4 miles. You’ll have to complete it in at least seven hours to be competitive, so you’ll need an average time of about 7.5 miles per hour over rough terrain.”

“I have a flat three mile stretch here. The fastest I’ve ever done that in is about eighteen minutes. I’ll try to hit fifteen minutes today. That would be about five minutes a mile.”

“Yeah, you’d need to hit eighteen minutes at the very least.”

“Sky, start looking to see what you can do to get me more speed. I’d like to just run my first mile on my own, but then I’d like to see what the nano can do after that, ok?”

“I’ll see what I can do Roland.”

Roland got down into his starting position. “On your mark, get

set, go!” He took off down the country road. His speed gauge read *11 mph* and continued climbing. He knew he needed to conserve some energy in order keep up that pace, but it felt really good to push faster. Speed was up to *14 mph*, and he was still feeling good. Roland started taking deeper breaths. His distance showed he had just passed the half mile mark. “How’s it coming, Sky?”

“I’m still making a few last adjustments. I’ll flip them on when you pass the one mile marker.” Skylar had configured Matthew’s last two plugins. She was madly typing on one terminal and then swiping it over to the next terminal to be checked, while she worked on the next one. Finally they were ready. She transmitted them over to Roland’s system. “They are ready.”

Roland could feel he was getting winded. His speed was down to *12 mph*. “Great. I’m about to hit the one mile mark.”

Skylar watched Roland’s video feed on the big data room wall. As soon as his distance hit the one mile mark, she hit the command to execute on her terminal. “Ok, they are both on now.”

Roland continued his pace. “I don’t feel any different. What do they do?”

“The first one is an oxygen enhancer. It will compress the air in your lungs as you breathe it in, allowing you to breathe in at least double the amount of air you normally do. This will get you more oxygen per breath. So, take a deep breath, and it probably will feel different.”

Roland took a deep breath, but instead of having to stop when he hit his full lung capacity, he kept inhaling. “Whoa, that was weird. But I like it!” His exhalation also took longer. After a few breaths he could tell that his head was clearer and some of the fatigue had left his arms and legs. “Speeding up.” Roland’s HUD jumped back up to *14 mph*.

Nano Contestant - Episode 1: Whatever It Takes

“The second one increases the contraction speed of your fast twitch muscle fibers. So, basically that means the faster that you go, the faster you *can* go. Lengthen your stride. See if you can hit *16 mph*.”

Roland began minimizing his side of the conversation to save air. “Lengthening stride.” Roland stretched each step as far as he could go. He also changed his position to being less of a jog and more of a sprint. He began hitting the pavement with the balls of his feet. His HUD speed read *16 mph*. “Hit 16!”

Skylar watched as his stride ate up the road. “Good. You just hit the two mile mark. You’ve only got one mile left. Give it all you’ve got!”

Sweat ran in rivulets down Roland’s face. “17!” He came up on a slight downward slope and pushed to take advantage of it. “18, 19!” Then he found his new running rhythm. He was taking eight steps for each breath. His head still felt clear, so he kept pushing his speed. “20, 21, 22.”

“You’ve only got a quarter mile to go, Roland. Keep it up!”

Roland could tell he was topping out on his speed as tunnel vision began to set in. “24.” He took in one more deep breath and then exhaled as he neared the end of his three miles. “26!”

Skylar smiled. “That’s it! That’s three miles.”

Roland went to a slow jog. He was breathing too hard to answer back. He turned around and headed for home. “Time?” “What’s my time?”

Skylar looked over at the timer. “Whoa, Roland, you aren’t going to believe this.”

“What was it? Did I make fifteen minutes?”

“No, you didn’t.”

“But, I...”

“12:42.”

“Wait? What?”

“Roland, you just ran three miles in twelve minutes and forty-two seconds!”

Roland smiled. He could feel goosebumps on his arms. “Twelve minutes. That means I was doing four minute miles!”

“That’s right. Well, four minutes and change.”

“Yes, and change. I’ve only ever barely broken six minute miles for this distance in the Marines. I think it was 5:50 or something. This is huge!”

Skylar finished the last of her espresso. “Roland, you are in a good place for the games. With today’s time and some hard training, you could be competitive.”

“Thanks, Sky. Great work on the plugins by the way.”

“You’re welcome. I think we can do a lot more down the road.”

“Hey Sky, I’m starved. Will you order me two meat lover’s pizzas? And whatever veggie thing you want for lunch?”

Skylar laughed. “Yeah, I will.” She pulled up the pizza place’s website and started putting in the order. “After you eat lunch, we need to go down to Pinnacle’s headquarters to do the in-person registration.

“Into the lair of the enemy...”

“Yep.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN:

CHOKE

SKYLAR AND ROLAND arrived at Pinnacle's headquarters. They followed the signs for the contestant registration and got to the end of a very long line. There had to be three hundred people in front of them. Most were groups of five or ten and wore matching team colors.

Skylar eyed all of the different people. The contestants were the easiest to pick out, because they were the fittest looking of each group. She leaned close to Roland and spoke in a low voice. "Look at that one in red. He's a digital for sure."

Roland followed her gaze to a man who looked to be in incredible shape and very handsome. "Why, because he looks photoshopped?"

Skylar nodded slightly. "Yeah, the digitals have their DNA designed so they are perfectly symmetrical and have all the most handsome or beautiful features, which they can change by using one of their digital DNA apps."

Roland watched as a passing girl made eyes at the digital. "Well, seems to be working for him here. We'll see how 'handsome' is at winning races."

Skylar folded her arms. "Right?" Then she looked down the long line in front of her. "I hope this line starts moving faster."

Roland turned to watch the people arriving on the right side of the room. He motioned with his eyes to a woman. "Sky, look at

that hybrid. Both of her legs are droid tech.”

Skylar turned to look in Roland’s direction. “Whoa! Usually people cover up their robotic implants out in public.”

Their line moved and Roland was able to take a step forward. “Yeah, but I bet here it’s like a status symbol or something.”

Skylar kept watching the woman. The hybrid’s legs gleamed a metallic silver. “Bet you’re right. I also bet she’s fast.”

Roland pulled a bottle of water from his backpack and offered one to Skylar. “Seems like I was reading that hybrids cannot be more than sixty percent droid tech or something like that. They have to have a certain amount of human tissue left.”

Skylar sipped her water. “Yeah, that’s right. Ol’ silver legs over there has got to be at least forty percent droid, if not more.”

Roland chugged his whole water bottle. “That’s a lot. I wonder what happened to her, that she lost both legs?”

Skylar turned back towards Roland. “If they can find a corporate sponsor, many of them will have their limbs replaced.”

Roland raised an eyebrow. “So they get perfectly good arms and legs removed, and then the company installs their tech in place of it?”

Skylar put the cap back on her water. “Yep, that’s right.”

“So what happens to their good limbs? Do they donate them or something?”

“That or sell them. I’ve read about people with low budgets that want to get into the Tech Games who sell their arms or legs to offset the costs of getting the new hardware.”

Roland shook his head. “That’s hard to wrap my head around.”

A small team of six dressed in light blue lined up behind Skylar and Roland. The contestant for the light blue team was standing at the front of his group. He had no robotic implants and his chiseled

features and muscular build suggested he was a digital.

The light blue contestant half smiled. “A hundred million dollar prize will make people do crazy things.” The contestant shook Roland’s hand. “I’m Enrique. This line looks stupid long, so I must be in the right place.”

Roland gave an upwards nod. “Hey, I’m Roland. We haven’t moved since we got here.”

Enrique crossed his arms. “You competed before?”

“Nope,” Roland said. “This is my first time. How about you?”

Enrique held up two fingers. “Twice. Last year and the year before.”

Roland gave a slight nod. “How did you do?”

“I was number 26 two years ago.”

Skylar snapped her fingers. “I remember you. You made it to the semi-finals last year.”

Enrique turned towards her. “Yep. That’s right. I made it to number 9. Are you his NAV?”

Skylar nodded. “Yeah, I’m his navigator and tech support.”

Enrique turned back to Roland. “Where’s your coach?”

Roland’s brow furrowed. “Coach? I don’t have one.”

Enrique pointed his thumb behind him. “I got three and a NAV and a tech on my team. My advice, get a coach. You are going to need one.” Enrique then turned his attention to some paperwork that another team member handed him.

Roland turned to Skylar and lowered his voice. “A coach? Oh well, we aren’t here to win.” He shrugged his shoulders. “We just need to be in long enough to get the information we need.”

Skylar nodded. “I agree, but a coach might be able to get you the time you need.”

Roland sighed.

Skylar pointed up towards the front. “Hey look, a bunch more Pinnacle employees are coming to help with registrations. That’s good news. Hopefully, we’ll start moving.”

Roland watched as twenty more employees started calling up the next teams. “Great, c’mon people. Let’s go.”

Skylar’s eyes got big. “Roland, look at the team coming in the main entry in the black uniforms!”

Roland turned towards the back. “Wow, they must have at least thirty people. Do you think that’s all for one contestant?”

Skylar motioned to one man that stood head and shoulders above the rest of the team in the black uniforms. “Yeah, I bet they are all here for him.”

Roland watched the big man. “He’s huge. What team is that?”

Skylar recognized their logo as they got closer. “Allied Robotics. That’s Pinnacle’s biggest competitor.”

“And they got twenty-nine people to support their one contestant?”

Skylar took another sip of her water. “I’m sure they want to show up Pinnacle at their own game.”

Roland watched the huge group line up behind the light blue team. “I like them already.”

The big man was wearing black athletic shorts and a sleeveless shirt. Both of his arms and his legs were a light blue metallic color. His muscular head sported a two inch mohawk.

Roland whispered to Skylar. “He’s got droid arms and legs!”

Skylar turned her head slightly to see. “He’s got to be pushing that sixty percent limit.”

Roland nodded and watched as the big man pushed his own people out of the way to get to the front of his group. “Looks like a

real nice guy.”

Then the big man tapped Enrique on the shoulder. “Hey, the little squealer came back this year. I missed having you as a punching bag.”

Enrique turned around. “Duke, what an unpleasant surprise.”

Duke shifted his massive bulk and grinned hideously at Enrique. “You look more pathetic than last year. Shouldn’t you have at least tried to train? You have taken all the fun out of crushing you again.”

People in the line were turning around to watch the outburst from Duke.

Enrique crossed his arms and stood his ground. “All those upgrades, and you are still so ugly. You’d think your team could have fixed your face by now. Maybe they could give you a conscience, too, so you wouldn’t cheat anymore.”

Duke put a beefy metallic blue finger on Enrique’s shoulder and gave it a shove. “Cheating? I do whatever it takes to win! You wouldn’t understand, because your DNA is programmed for losing!” Duke laughed obnoxiously at his own joke.

A member of Duke’s team, also dressed in black, ran from the back of the group and grabbed Duke’s arm. “Duke! Stop! This isn’t the place. Save it for the Games.”

Duke flipped his wrist and the man stumbled backwards. “Back off, Coach! Duke turned his attention back to Enrique and shook his fist in front of his face. “How about a little preview of what this season is going to be like?”

Pinnacle’s security started heading towards the two contestants.

Enrique smiled. “Please take a swing at me. It would be worth it to get you disqualified right now before the games even begin!”

The coach tried again. “Duke, don’t do anything to get

disqualified. C'mon. Just walk away."

Duke turned towards the coach. "I'm getting real tired of your constant nagging, Coach."

"I'm here to help you. Now, just chill out," said the coach.

Duke reached out and grabbed his coach by the neck with one hand and lifted him off the ground. "I don't want your help. You're fired." Duke began to squeeze his hand together. The coach's face began turning red as he struggled against Duke's iron grip.

Roland ran over to help the coach being strangled. "Hey! Let him go!"

Duke dropped his coach and turned to Roland. "Who are you, little leprechaun?"

Roland helped the coach up. "Back off! Go simmer down."

Duke took a step towards Roland and then talked loud enough for everyone around to hear. "Anyone lose an insignificant support staffer? Looks like your bag boy got loose. Come get him before I teach him some manners."

The security team arrived and helped the coach off to the side and a medic began to check him over.

Roland stood up straight. "I'm here to compete."

Duke laughed loudly. "In what? Can't be the Tech Games. You got no metal, so you can't be a hybrid and you're too plain to be a digital. Just what are you competing in?"

Skylar stood there silently fuming. *Roland, don't draw any more attention to yourself*, she thought.

Roland didn't even flinch. "I'm a Tech Games competitor. I'm not a hybrid or a digital." Roland turned around and walked back to his place in line.

Duke raised both of his arms to address the crowd. "Hear that everyone? This little guy isn't a hybrid or a digital. He's got his

own home brewed tech, and he thinks he can compete!” Duke gave a loud boisterous laugh. “Watch him, everyone. He won’t even make it off the starting line!”

Skylar leaned in close once Roland got back in line. “Forget him. He doesn’t matter.”

Roland ran his hands through his hair. “It’s almost our turn to register. I just want to get out of here.”

The coach made his way over to Roland and put out his hand. “I’m Lincoln. I wanted to say ‘thanks’ for coming over when you did.”

Roland shook Lincoln’s hand. “I’m Roland. Anyone would have done the same.”

Lincoln shook his head. “No, no one else did.”

Roland looked at Lincoln’s neck. “How’s your neck? It still looks red.”

Lincoln lightly touched his neck. “Yeah, it still hurts, but it’s better. I’ll be ok.”

Skylar grimaced. “I heard him fire you. Surely he wouldn’t do that with the games only a few weeks away?”

“Yeah, Duke has a bad temper, but when he fires someone, they don’t get a second chance. The company just replaces them quickly, because they want to keep Duke happy.”

Roland shifted his backpack around. “What’s your plans now?”

Lincoln nodded again. “I guess this year is shot. I’ll have to start looking for a contestant for next season. It’s kind of a relief, honestly. I coached a couple of other contestants to the semi-finals before, but Duke was the most difficult to work with.”

Roland glanced at Skylar. “Well, I don’t have a coach. So, if you were still wanting to be a Tech Games coach this year, I could really use one.”

Lincoln looked surprised. “Yeah, actually I would be interested. What’s your three mile time?”

Skylar shifted her weight. “His time was 12:42. Why?”

Lincoln rubbed his throat. “I just want to know what I’m working with. Duke’s time was 12 flat. Any time under 13:30 is considered to be in about the top fifty percent. A time under 13 is in the top twenty-five percent. Roland, you probably have a good chance, but there’s no guarantee this late into the competition. The games are a little less than a month away. I can help you, but we will have to do intense training with long hours every day.”

Roland looked serious. “I’ll train hard, but you need to know I can’t pay you. I just don’t have the money, but I can offer you an equal share of anything the team wins.”

Lincoln shrugged his shoulders. “Sounds good to me. I’d do it for free if I got to get back at Duke.”

Roland put out his hand. “Great. Welcome to the team.”

Lincoln shook Roland’s hand. “We start at 4 AM tomorrow.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

ORGANIC

A PINNACLE EMPLOYEE called them forward to register.

Enrique's team also got called and went to the registration table to the right of Roland.

Skylar and Lincoln both filled out their paperwork, and Roland waited for them to finish. Roland was just starting on his when Duke's team came up to the table on Roland's left.

Roland stepped up to the registration table.

Duke came and stood right behind Roland and crossed his arms. He leaned his head towards his team. "Go ahead and get registered. I want a good laugh. I'm going to hear the little leprechaun get registered over here."

A news reporting team had missed the earlier opportunity that Duke had presented for drama on the Tech Games and wasn't about to miss it again. They hurried over near Duke and Roland and zoomed their cameras in.

Roland sighed as he watched Duke's shadow fall over him and the registration lady. *Let's hurry this along*, he thought.

The registration lady motioned Roland to come forward. "I'm Rosie. Welcome to the Tech Games. I'll be getting you registered today. What's your name?"

Roland handed her his paperwork. "Roland Crane."

Duke smiled. "Hi, Roland."

Roland ignored him.

Rosie typed on her keyboard. “Are you the contestant for your team?”

“Yes, I am.”

Duke waved his arms around. “Hear that, everyone? Roland, here, is a Tech Games contestant.”

The news anchor whispered to his camera man. “You getting this?”

The camera man nodded.

The news anchor began making his way closer.

Rosie continued typing. “What type of technology will you be showcasing in the games? You know, are you a digital or a hybrid?”

Roland leaned in closer to her and lowered his voice. “Nanotech.”

Duke raised his voice. “You don’t have to lower your voice on my account, Roland. I have enhanced hearing.” Then Duke turned around to address the entire registration hall. “Look everyone, Roland is a nano!” Duke motioned for the news crew to come over. “You guys will want to make sure you get Roland on camera on race day!”

The news man spoke into his microphone. “Why is that, sir?” Then he held his microphone up towards Duke.

Duke’s smile turned wicked. “Roland is a nano, and you know what that means!”

The news man pulled his microphone back briefly. “Please tell us what that means.” Then he smiled and moved the microphone back to Duke.

Duke bent down a little and looked directly into the camera. “It means he’s going to die! No contestant using nano has ever finished the qualifying round. They always burn or explode.”

Nano Contestant - Episode 1: Whatever It Takes

Lincoln walked over and got in front of Duke and the camera man. "That's it. Let's go."

Duke scowled. "I fired you, Lincoln. Why are you still here?"

Security came over and surrounded the little group.

Lincoln crossed his arms. "Yeah, you did. I didn't do it for you." Lincoln pointed with his thumb towards Roland. "I did it for him. I'm coaching him now."

Duke bellowed with laughter and slapped his knee. "Oh, that's rich! Roland, you are going to lose for sure now - with Lincoln here."

Roland never turned around and continued with his registration.

Duke took a few steps back towards his team.

Lincoln stood his ground between Duke and Roland.

The news camera man continued filming.

Rosie typed away on her keyboard. "We have to let all contestants know that we have a policy that states that no more than sixty percent of your body can be foreign materials. That includes all of the following: metal, metal alloys, silicon, carbon fibers, plastics and rubbers. Do you know approximately what percentage of your body is not organic human flesh?"

Roland kept his voice low. "Zero percent. I'm a 100% organic."

Duke cupped his hands around his mouth and hollered. "He's completely organic, everyone! He doesn't have any tech inside him at all!"

Roland grabbed the edge of the registration table so he wouldn't turn around and confront Duke.

Lincoln also cupped his hands around his mouth. "Show's over folks. Duke is drunk as usual. Probably on motor oil since he's a

100% android.”

The crowd murmured and laughed in response.

Security came over and stood between Duke and Lincoln. The lead security guy told Duke if he caused any more trouble, he would be thrown out.

Rosie paused her typing and raised an eyebrow. “That is very unusual, sir. Are you certain? We don’t allow normal humans to participate in the games.”

Roland sighed. “Yes, I’m sure. I’ve got new tech that is completely organic.”

Rosie went back to typing. “Ok, sir. I’ve never had a case like this before. We’ll have to verify that you have enough tech inside of you to compete in the games. Please step behind the table here so our technicians can scan you.”

Roland handed Skylar his backpack and stepped around the table.

A tech instructed Roland to stand inside a metal circle on the ground. Roland stepped inside it. The tech hit a button on his handheld computer and a green hologram sprung up from the circle on the ground. The green cylinder enclosed Roland and spun around three times and then disappeared. The tech showed his results to Rosie.

Rosie typed in the results on her terminal. “Our scan shows the same. You are completely, 100% organic. I didn’t know that was possible. Next, we need to check your tech viability by measuring your signal outputs.”

Skylar could tell from Roland’s stiff movements that even though he didn’t say anything, he was not happy with the situation. She stepped behind the table next to Roland. “I’m his support. I’ll help you with the signal measurement. What are you looking for?”

The tech guy explained that he needed to see a demonstration of signal control and output to prove there was a signal coming from Roland.

Skylar hit a few buttons on her computer. “Ok, all signals are on.”

The tech waved a small signal wand in front of Roland, but did not detect any signals. “I’m not getting anything.”

Roland frowned.

Skylar went over to look at the tech’s equipment. He pulled up a hologram that showed his settings. She pointed to a section part way down the list. “There’s your problem. He’s transmitting, but your frequencies are set to read droid tech, not our private, lower frequencies. We don’t broadcast publicly. Change these three.”

The tech adjusted the hologram that showed his signal settings, and then waved his wand over Roland for a second time. The wand beeped for each of the three frequencies.” The tech gave a thumb’s up and then went to show his results to Rosie.

Rosie quickly entered everything into the computer. “Last thing I need is a quick blood check to verify that you don’t have digital DNA.”

A med-tech in scrubs and latex gloves came over to Roland. “Hold out your finger please. It’ll just be a quick prick, and we’ll be done.”

Roland held out his finger as instructed.

The med-tech handed him a handheld machine with a disposable plastic cap. The plastic cap went over Roland’s index finger. She hit the button and her machine clicked. Then she pulled it off and offered Roland a bit of gauze and a bandaid.

Roland shook his head ‘no,’ and then just wiped the blood off on his pants. “That it?”

The med-tech nodded. “Yep, that’s it. No digital DNA in you.” She showed the results to Rosie.

Rosie entered in the med-tech’s results into her computer. “Ok, it looks like everything is in order for you, Roland. She handed him a small plastic capsule. This is your tracker for the games. Please have your physician inject this into you before the games begin. It will give us your exact location and your vital signs during the Tech Games.

Roland held up the capsule. He could see a small metal piece about the size of a grain of rice on the inside.

Rosie smiled. “You are all set now. Thank you.”

Roland put the capsule in his backpack. “Thanks.” Then he turned headed towards the exit with Lincoln and Skylar.

Duke had watched all of Roland’s tests with interest. He waved mockingly. “Bye, Organic Boy! Looking forward to watching you die in the games!”

Roland turned his head to yell something back.

Lincoln kept Roland moving forward. “Don’t say anything. Just keep walking. He’s not worth it.”

Roland turned his head back and walked out without saying a word. He let out a big sigh of relief as soon they were outside the building. “Let’s go home!”

Lincoln smiled. “Get rested, Roland. You’re going to need it, because tomorrow training starts!”

Roland cracked his knuckles. “I’m ready!”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN:

LETHAL

ROLAND WAS UP at three thirty the next morning. He was excited to start training. He got started on breakfast right away.

Skylar walked into the kitchen once she heard the clinking and banging of pots and pans. “Good morning. Any coffee?”

Roland kept working on his second helping of eggs and bacon. “Good morning.” He gestured to a steaming cup of coffee on the table. “All yours. More in the pot if you need it. I’m going to need your help through training.”

Skylar blew on her coffee to cool it. “And I’m going to need coffee to make it through your training.”

The microwave beeped. Roland got up and came back juggling a potato between his hands. “Ooh, hot! I thought I should have some carbs to keep me going today.”

Skylar spread jam on a piece of toast. “Hey, I’m having a programmer friend come over later today. I need help getting some of the software to work with you.”

Roland put big chunks of butter on his potato. “I thought you were a programmer.”

Skylar had a bite of her toast. “I can do coding, but I’m better at working with systems. She’s an expert.”

Roland’s mouth was too full to talk, so he nodded.

Skylar sipped her coffee. “We need custom software for you to be able to control the nano yourself. I don’t know how to build an interface like that. I was thinking of having her join the team, but most of her work would be done remotely. She doesn’t really like being around people.”

Roland chugged a whole cup of cold, black coffee. “Fine by me. Sky, if you think we need her, then we need her.”

Skylar wiped her mouth with a napkin. “Thanks.”

Lincoln knocked on the front door.

Roland opened it. “Come on in, Lincoln. You don’t have to knock.”

Lincoln shook Roland’s hand and waved to Skylar. “Good morning. Thanks. Hey, you guys can just call me Coach.”

Roland gestured towards the table. “Want anything to eat? Or coffee?”

Lincoln held up his hand. “Nope. I already ate.” He sat down. “I’d like for us all to put together a strategy for the games. First, though, why don’t you fill me in on the tech we are using. All I know so far is what I saw during registration.”

Roland gave a half smile. “Wow, and you still came back today?”

Skylar rolled her eyes. “I wasn’t expecting them to make Roland do all those tests, especially in front of everyone.”

Lincoln poured a glass of water. “And Duke wasn’t exactly helping.”

Roland crossed his arms. “Neither was the news crew. That was the last thing I needed.”

Lincoln took a big gulp of water. “Nope. No team wants to be the butt of a joke, especially on national TV, but you handled it well. Best thing you could have done was nothing, and that’s what you did.”

Roland finished off his potato. “You sure?”

Lincoln’s face was serious. “Without a doubt, it was the right thing to do. It took a lot of discipline to not start a fight. Discipline I can use. You will need a cool head in the games, because there’s a lot of pressure. Street brawling will just get you injured and probably kicked out.”

Roland turned to Skylar. “Do you know if they aired the little ordeal from yesterday?”

Skylar swiped her hand and a small hologram appeared near her hand. She scrolled through the headlines with her finger.

“Yeah, looks like you were a hit, all right.” She swiped her hand towards the wall and the video clip began to play. “Duke’s comments about you dying are making you really popular.” She swiped her hand to change the channel to a sports caster. “They are already analyzing your chances.”

Roland sighed. “Chances of what? Winning the Tech Games?”

Skylar swiped her hand and the wall went blank. “No, of dying before the qualifying round finishes.”

Coach leaned back in his chair. “Oh, don’t worry about that. All of this publicity is actually good for you, because it will get you fans. And you’ll need fan votes in order to actually advance in the later rounds of the Tech Games.

Roland grabbed a sports drink from the fridge. “Wow, my adoring public...”

Lincoln took another drink of water. “Ok. From this point forward, though, don’t pay any attention to the news media.”

Skylar stirred her coffee. “Agreed. Ok, so you need to know about Roland’s tech.”

Lincoln stretched his arms. “Yes, I do. Fill me in.”

Skylar explained to him about how the nanotech worked, and what they had seen so far. She pulled up the data from Roland’s three mile run and let Lincoln look it over. He only asked a few questions here and there, but mainly, he took notes.

Lincoln set his notebook down on the table. “Wow, well, that is very different. I think you guys have some real possibilities here. It seems like the biggest issues you have are an internal communication method that doesn’t rely on outside hardware and internal controls for Roland. Contestants that rely on external comms have a hard time and usually don’t make it very far. The comms also need to be encrypted. Keep in mind that these contestants will do anything to get an advantage. Signal jammers are common. Duke has three of them. And it is vital that Roland be able to control the nanotech himself.”

Skylar finished the last of her coffee. “I have an expert coming over today to begin helping us with those two exact

problems.”

Lincoln gave a thumbs up. “That’s great news. Please let me know when you have something we can test. I want all of the wrinkles ironed out before the games start.”

Skylar pushed her cup and saucer away. “Of course. I’ll let you know.”

Lincoln turned to Roland and stood up. “Let’s talk fighting and weapons.”

Roland stood up too. “I’ve been doing martial arts since I was a kid, and I was in the Marines for four years.”

Lincoln stepped away from the table. “Do you have a garage or training area?”

Roland motioned for Lincoln to follow. “The garage is this way.”

Lincoln walked around the garage and looked at the punching bag, wrestling mat, pull up bars and other equipment. “So you’ve done tournaments and stuff then, right?”

Roland nodded. “Yep, I’ve been doing one or two a year.”

Lincoln stepped forward and before Roland could react, had a knife at his throat. “The Tech Games are nothing like those tournaments. Now, you’ve got to learn to fight dirty. A tournament is defensive. The games are offensive.” Lincoln relaxed his knife and stepped back.

Roland took a deep breath and stared at Lincoln. “So, what kind of coach are you, exactly?”

Lincoln whipped around and threw his knife. It flipped end over end and then landed with a loud ‘thwack’ sound in the bullseye of a target hanging on the wall at the end of the garage. He turned around to face Roland. “Allied Robotics hired me to be the lethal force coach for Duke.”

Roland smiled, fully, for the first time in a long time. “Well, Coach, I’m ready to learn. I want to know *everything*.”

Lincoln pulled his knife out of the wall and came back over to Roland. “That, Roland, is something I never heard from Duke. He never listened to anyone. Your attitude alone puts you miles ahead of Duke. I think your tech will give you abilities far greater

than what either a hybrid or a digital can achieve. I will teach you how to strike first, hardest and last. I will show you how to make sure your opponent does not get up again.” Lincoln stood with his hands on his hips. “What weapons are you trained in?”

Roland went over to the corner of the garage and picked up a wooden katana blade. “The sword.” He went through a few steps, demonstrating common moves like the thrust, parry and counter. Roland returned the sword and picked up a staff. “The bo staff.” Roland also performed several moves with it. He set it down and picked up a pair of nunchucks. “And nunchucks.” He whirled them around his body and then set them down. “I prefer the bo because of its reach.”

Lincoln reached in his pocket, pulled something out and then tossed it to Roland. It was a cylinder, about an inch in diameter and about five inches long. The whole thing was a dark gray color.

Roland turned it over in his hand. “What is it?”

“It’s a carbon alloy material. It’s extremely strong, but can it can also be reformed. Press with your index and thumb.”

Roland pressed. The cylinder telescoped to be five feet long. Roland looked surprised. “Wow. Cool! It’s light too.”

“Yes, it is. Now press with your middle finger and thumb.”

Roland pressed again. This time half of the cylinder telescoped back up into the bottom of the handle, but the top half grew wider and thinner. Roland turned it to look at it. It was flat and thin, like a blade. “Now it’s a sword?”

Lincoln nodded. “Yes, it can be programmed to nearly any shape. I’d like Skylar to take a look at it and see how we can integrate it into your systems. I think with your ability to create 3D models quickly and accurately, this weapon could be a real game changer for you.”

Roland changed it back into a regular handle. “Does it have a receiver?”

Lincoln shook his head. “No, but we’ll order one for it.” He went over to an old dry erase board that was on the wall. “Every day from now until game day, we’ll work on running, climbing,

fighting, strength and mental. Skylar tells me you're not at full replication yet."

Roland came over by the board. "Yep, that's right. Every day I'm gaining percentages of improvement."

Lincoln drew a grid on the board and wrote down the categories. "Roland, every day I'm going to push you to your limits. If you aren't training, then I want you to be eating to give that nano cell replication the maximum amount of nourishment. If you aren't doing those two things, I want you to be sleeping. Nothing else matters."

Roland crossed his arms and nodded. "Train, eat, sleep. Nothing else matters."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN:

755

TRAIN, EAT AND sleep was all Roland did for next the twenty-seven days. Skylar and her friend Angela worked out the communication issues and got a private network set up that could communicate via radio or satellite. They were even able to experimentally send data through light pulses.

Angela developed a new interface that allowed Roland to control nearly all the aspects of his nanotech system from within his brain. He could direct thoughts and commands to the system to be instantly executed.

Roland trained hard every day. Each day he got faster and stronger. Coach taught him the exact spots to inflict maximum damage to his opponents with the least amount of effort. His carbon alloy weapon was always with him. Once the new receiver was installed, Skylar and Angela were also able to create an extra interface for controlling the weapon. It now interfaced directly with his nano system. Most of the time, he could easily change the weapon by thinking of the 3D shape he wanted, but sometimes, it seemed to have a mind of its own. Coach said it was good enough for the time they had and suggested he name the weapon. The carbon alloy then became known as *Charlotte*.

Finally, the day for the Pinnacle Tech Games arrived.

Roland, Skylar and Coach went to their team's area at Pinnacle's headquarters. It was a plain white room, but it was quiet and isolated from the other teams. They all toted in the computer equipment from Roland's house.

Skylar had it plugged in and set up in a few minutes. "Comm check, comm check."

Roland inhaled deeply. He could hear Sky in his head. “I hear you, loud and clear. How’s my other signals?”

The english accent of Hobbes could be heard. “Good morning, everyone.”

Skylar went to typing on her holographic terminal before Hobbes could finish. “Hi, Hobbes.” She studied the graphs of the signal outputs. “All right, Roland, all your signals look good.”

Coach was also looking at the graphs. “Your heart rate is elevated, Roland.” Then he smiled.

Roland bent his leg up and stretched his thigh muscles. “Yeah, I’m nervous.”

Coach nodded. “I know. It’s ok. It means you’re human. This is a big race. There are going to be one thousand people out there competing. Only the top forty-eight get to actually go on to the Tech Games.”

Roland let his leg down. “I know. That’s why I’m nervous.”

Coach looked Roland straight in the eyes. “Look, there may be a thousand other people out there, but the vast majority don’t have the skills or strength to get into the actual Tech Games. You do.”

Roland nodded, but he knew it was just a pep talk and that he would have to fight hard to get to number forty-eight. A red light began to blink on Roland’s right arm under the skin. “Well, looks like they are calling me to check in to the contestant’s area.”

Skylar gave Roland a hug. “Godspeed! Get out there and beat them!”

“Thanks, Sky.” Roland left the team area and headed down the long hallway to the Great Room.

The Great Room was big enough to hold all one thousand contestants, another thousand camera crew and Pinnacle employees, and only feel half full. Roland held out his arm for the employee to scan the red glowing tracking device in Roland’s arm. The employee’s scanner beeped and then he motioned Roland on through his checkpoint. The tracking device light turned green under Roland’s skin and then turned off.

Roland made his way through the crowd and up towards

the front. He saw a food buffet on the side and instinctively went towards it. Coach had tracked his nutrition and found he needed to eat at least ten thousand calories a day. He grabbed four pieces of pizza then stepped away from the crowd. He recognized a light blue athletic uniform coming towards him. "Enrique. You ready to race?"

Enrique nodded. "Roland." He gestured to all the people. "This is crazy, isn't it?"

Roland nodded. "Yeah! Insane. I can't believe this many people are going to run today." He took a huge bite of his pizza.

Enrique looked down at Roland's plate. "Always eating, huh? I don't think I could eat now. My stomach is all over the place."

Roland smiled. "Food helps me with the jitters and my tech burns a lot of calories. Hey, looks like someone is coming on stage. See you at the finish line."

Enrique turned to face the stage. "Good luck. Stay sharp out there!" Then Enrique grabbed a water and walked back into the crowd.

Roland continued to eat while he listened to 'Honest AI,' the announcer for the Tech Games up on stage. He gave a few introductory remarks and then thanked some sponsors. Roland grabbed a plate of pasta after the third sponsor was thanked. Then Honest AI informed everyone that the Tech Games would begin in thirty minutes and to be sure to be lined up. Then the outside doors were opened, and people were directed to line up at their assigned starting position number.

Roland walked out into a large grassy field. The Pinnacle employee at the exit door had told him to line up at number 755. Roland walked about a hundred yards or so to the right of the door, watching the starting numbers painted on the turf. He finally found his and went and stood on it. "Skylar, time check?"

Skylar glanced at her clock and put on her headset. "You got ten minutes until it starts."

Coach was also wearing a headset. "Just stretch out, Roland. Keep your mind clear. Don't talk to anyone. Breathe slow

and deep.”

Roland sat down on the grass, a little behind his number, and began stretching out his legs. He saw a short Jamaican woman with droid legs step into the position on his left. She nodded to him and then began her own stretching routine. Roland nodded back. Then he felt a large shadow fall on him.

“Organic Boy!” Duke’s huge voice bellowed.

Roland kept on stretching.

Duke walked up to position 756. “What a coincidence, I’m right next to you.” Duke motioned for a camera crew that had been following him to come closer. “This is the one I told you to watch. This little guy is using nanotech. You guys keep your cameras right here. Then you will be sure to catch it when he explodes!”

Coach was pacing. “Roland! Listen to me. Do not engage him. Do not even look at him. It’s what he wants. Keep looking straight ahead.”

Roland stood up, but kept looking forward, ignoring Duke.

The little Jamaican woman in position 754, however, did not. She turned towards Duke and put her hands on her hips. “Hey mon! You, you fat, overgrown can opener.”

Duke looked shocked and pointed to himself. “You talking to me?”

The Jamaican woman bobbed her head. “Yeah mon, you. Shut up! I’m gettin’ ready to race, and you’re interferrin’.” Then she moved her headphones from around her neck to over her ears.

Duke threw his head back and laughed even louder.

Roland didn’t look at Duke, but couldn’t resist a little smirk.

Coach was watching the feed from Roland’s vision and could see Duke’s blue metal in Roland’s peripheral view. There was a small band of light glowing around Duke’s forearm. “Roland, the race is about to start. Listen to me very carefully. Let Duke get ahead of you. He has armed an EMP blast, and you don’t want to be close to him when it goes off.”

Roland looked and saw the blue light on Duke’s forearm. “Will do.”

Nano Contestant - Episode 1: Whatever It Takes

The announcer's voice came over the loud speaker. "All Tech Games contestants please line up!" One thousand athletes stood on their numbered starting lines and looked ahead, hoping to be one of the lucky forty-eight that moved forward into the Tech Games. "Take your positions." One thousand athletes crouched into their starting positions.

The sound of Roland's own heartbeat was deafening in his ears. Adrenaline surged through his veins. As he crouched into his starting position, he could feel every muscle in his body was pulled tight, ready to spring into motion at the sound of the starter gun. Sweat ran down his back, arms and legs. It evaporated nearly instantly under the hot sun. The cooling from the evaporation gave Roland goosebumps. The hairs on his arms stood straight up, increasing his tactile feeling of even the slightest breath of wind.

"On your Mark!"

Roland could smell the dirt where his shoe had dug into the manicured turf to gain a better propulsion foothold.

"Get Set!"

He could hear the measured breathing of the other contestants. The Jamaican woman was breathing shorter and faster than him. Duke seemed to be almost continuously inhaling.

"Go!"

...Continue the Tech Games Race!

Find out what happens next!

Nano Contestant **Episode 2: Ultimate Endurance**



<http://leifsterling.com/go/2f>

**OR get a discount when you buy Episodes 2 & 3
together! >>**

(Duke says, "No! You puny human! You can't handle it.")

You are a smart reader!
Save \$1 on Episodes 2 & 3 when you buy the collection!

Nano Contestant Episodes 1-3 Collection



<http://leifsterling.com/go/2g>

Thank you!

...Continue the Tech Games Race!

Ready for Episode 3?

Nano Contestant

Episode 3: Combat Obstacles



<http://leifsterling.com/go/2h>

Did *you* enjoy Episode 1 of the Nano Contestant Series?



I really want to know! You can help others find out about the Nano Contestant by leaving a review!

Review on Amazon Here!



Review on Goodreads Here!



about the author:

Leif Sterling

Leif Sterling has always had a rich imagination and an eccentricity for all things technical. He read every door-stoppingly, thick computer manual that he could get his hands on from the time he was twelve on. Not surprisingly, college yielded bachelors and masters degrees in IT for him, which has come in handy when describing futuristic nano systems that haven't been invented yet.

He enjoys using his powers for good, especially in the craft of storytelling - dreaming up the barely possible, and then placing the reader right in the middle of the action.

Writing is also a great reason to stay inside, in the AC, away from the hot Texas sun where he lives with his beautiful wife, two children and one feisty cat.

I love to hear from readers! Feel free drop me an email at *sterling.leif@gmail.com* and visit my blog to see when the next episode is coming out!

Thanks for reading!

~Leif Sterling~

www.LeifSterling.com