



THE MAN OF
CLOUD 9

NEW SCIENCE-FICTION FROM BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

ADAM DREECE

The Man of Cloud 9

(5 Chapter Sample)

by Adam Dreece

ADZO Publishing Inc.

Calgary, Canada

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DEDICATION

To my wife, who has been on this crazy adventure of life with me for over twenty years. She listened to the wild ideas and ambitions of a crazy long haired guy in university, proposed a second date after I crashed and burned revealing my awkwardness and complete ineptitude at the first one, and inspires me every day. No one could have a better companion and partner through this journey.

And special thanks to my amazing beta readers, especially Shannon, Stacy, Sarah, Chris and Randy who went through multiple versions and pulled no punches in helping me make this book what it could be. You guys are amazing.

CHAPTER ONE

A GOODBYE

“Few people know that when the solar flare burned the middle states, Niko almost abandoned his dream. Imagine that for a moment. There would have been no NanoClouds, no hero bringing about an era of innovation, no one reminding our broken nation that it could heal. We would have stayed in the shadow of the past, instead of rising and casting our own.” Phoebe took a steadying breath and smiled. “I got to know Niko right after The Flare. He was so passionate about this vision he had. And each and every day he was urged by those in authority to drop it. His life would have been so much easier if he had, but he wouldn’t, he couldn’t. That’s not... wasn’t Niko.” A sorrowful laugh escaped. “Not at all.” She gripped the sides of the old podium and stared out at the enormous crowd. There sat captains of industry, heads of startup companies, press, politicians, and friends. She still couldn’t believe she’d been asked to give the first speech.



She pushed her long, curly black hair over her ears, revealing more of her beautiful square jaw and the sadness that soaked her from soul to her mocha-brown face.

She looked at the front row. She smiled at Tass, a younger woman with a topknot of dark hair. For so long, the two women had acted like rivals for Niko's attention. Why had it taken Niko's death for them to be able to find common ground?

Phoebe glanced at the silent cameras-drones as they floated about, broadcasting the funeral to hundreds of millions of people around the world. She closed her eyes and took in a breath of the warm and welcoming summer air.

"For days, the news had been filled with stories about the raw power of the destruction, about those who had been evacuated from the coasts decades before or who had escaped the Great Quake of California, having once again lost everything. It didn't matter that the best minds had seen it coming over a year ahead of time and that everyone had been safely removed because it was yet another opportunity to tell tales of destruction and despair. It almost tipped Niko over the edge."

"But somehow," she said, glancing at the woman with the topknot, "he held on to his dream. It was a privilege to see it first hand in the early days, as that almost extinguished spark of innovation became a



roaring fire. And then, to be there at the end, despite his broken body, to see his passion and fire still burning as brightly. There won't ever be another Niko Rafaelo." She shook, tears streaming down. "Thank you."

CHAPTER TWO

THE THESIS

Eighteen Years Earlier

“Geezes, Niko! How many times are you going to keep coming to me with the same flooding idea? No, no, no, no, and today of all days? Did you see the news? Millions of mid-Western Americans are watching the solar flare destroy their homes and towns today. And you think taking another run at me with the nanobot idea’s going to fly somehow?” asked Niko’s thesis professor.

“The flare has nothing to do with me,” countered Niko.

“Doesn’t it? What if instead of wasting your time trying to breathe new life into that horrific nanobot technology, you actually found a way to help people? Let the idea go. Come up with something to help the regions constantly ravaged by storms or tsunamis. Come up with something that even hints at keeping Manhattan dry, and you’d make a mint.” The bald



professor bowed his head and took a breath, shuffling the books under his arm. "Please, listen to me this time. You're running out of time, and your thesis idea has to have real, redeemable, social value."

"But they do have redeemable value," said Niko, his fists clenched. "Can you just look at the proposal?"

The professor cursed under his breath. "I'll say it again: nanobots are dead. I will not be the one standing there with the blood of innocents on my hands. They were banned decades ago because of arrogance like yours, and where did that leave how many thousands? Hear me when I say this Mister Rafaello, I will *never* approve this idea or one remotely related to it." He glared at Niko, who was glaring back at him. "You're running out of time. You have what, ten weeks left?"

"Eight."

Shaking his head, the professor said, "Eight weeks, geezes. We both know what happens if you don't have an approved thesis by that point— you're out of here, and no other college will pick you up. I know full well that you need this because of your home life, but that's not my problem. I have a standard to maintain, as well as the college's reputation to worry about."

Niko stood there fuming, watching the professor as he walked off towards his office. "What's the allergy you have to anything revolutionary? About



fixing the errors of the past so that we can make a brighter future? Why can't we *dare* to reclaim what we've lost?" he yelled, walking up to him.

"There's plenty that we don't have today that we had in years gone by and I'm fine with that. The early part of the twenty-first century was fraught with excess and ego. Why would we want to bring that back?"

"Because we believed in things, we dared to imagine," snapped Niko.

"And if I believed that was your goal, I'd read your proposal. But what I see is you ignoring all the work that hundreds of brilliant minds did that still ended up, because of weekend hackers, killing thousands upon thousands of people. I saw the news reports when they originally aired. Imagine being eight years old and hearing how innocent people were dying because little robots in their bloodstream were releasing weeks'-worth of medications in seconds. I was terrified each night that I'd find one of my parents dead in the morning."

"My nanobots wouldn't be in the body though."

"And that sounds safe, to you, right now, but is it? I'm not willing to take that risk," replied the professor.

Niko scratched his shaggy beard in frustration. "You've granted some of my peers the go-ahead for some absolutely stupid ideas."



The professor's face went red. He waved his door open, revealing a hoarder's dream of an academic office. He stared at the floor shaking his head. Then glancing about the empty hallways, said "How about some blunt truth, Mister Rafaelo? If you were as brilliant as you seem to think you are, you'd have tackled this idea by the time you were twenty, and the world would already be singing your praises. You're what, twenty-five? Granted, you're a smart guy, but neither you nor your grades match up to the reputation you had when we accepted you. You need to face reality. You aren't the guy you think you are." He took a steadying breath. "The guys who founded TalkItNow, they invented it while in their second year here. And then, they swallowed everything from the new online world and the remnants of the old Internet into their universe, with little exception."

"Go, watch the news, come up with something good or you're done." He stomped into his office and waved briskly at the door sensor, causing it to close abruptly in front of Niko.

Niko stood there, his chin trembling, his hands shaking. He leaned against a wall and slid down. Putting his head on his knees and he focused on keeping his emotional dam from breaking. With a huge sigh, he ran his fingers through his long hair, putting it back into a ponytail. He felt the grime from it and got up. It was time to head home.



The next morning, Niko stepped out of the steamy bathroom into the main room of the tiny, second-floor apartment. His mind was still wrestling with his argument with his professor.

Mechanically, he walked over his mattress to his blue-brown discolored dresser. Beside the dresser was an old, low resolution holographic video streaming box that occasionally worked.

Pulling out a shirt and giving it a quick sniff, he put it on along with some relaxed pants. As he reached for some socks, he caught a glimpse of the gold trimmed envelope containing the offer letter from TalkItNow. He'd received it nine months ago, and they'd confirmed by voice and message that it would remain open for a year. The salary they'd offered was generous, but he couldn't imagine himself working for anyone.

He'd stopped at a campus cafe on the way home and got caught up on world events. The raw power of the destruction had left him speechless and in a daze, the whole way home.

He glanced at the purple bedroom door and noted it was ajar.

Bracing himself, he bellowed, "Are you still home?"

"Yeah," replied a young, female voice amongst a sudden roar of rustling. "It's here somewhere... come



on. There we go! Yeah. Only for a sec, though. I'm going over to Tatiana's. Is it okay if I stay for dinner?"

Niko was relieved he wouldn't have to face her. "Sure. I'll be at the office then. Send me a message when you're heading home."

"You're always home," came the snarky reply.

"Hey," he snapped. "Did you see what happened? They were showing images of the solar flare on the news."

"I did. Crazy stuff," she replied. "I'm happy no one was there to get hurt."

Niko nodded.

"Hey," she said, "don't start season four of The Wizard Killer without me, okay?"

"I won't. Though you know, you're not technically old enough to watch that," he replied, shaking his head.

"Intellect versus number of trips around the sun. It didn't stop us from watching the first three seasons!"

He shrugged, a chuckle escaping. "Maybe that's just bad judgment on my part. Anyway, I doubt the old holo-screen's up for it today." he asked it. "Even if it can form an image today, it'll probably won't even hover much over the screen. I wish we had the money for a new one."

There was the sound of drawers opening and closing. "You'd just get distracted by a new one."



Anyway, I'm sure the old clunker's in a good mood," came the bouncy reply. "Oh, hey, weren't you going to see the prof today?"

He cringed.

"How did your pitch go? Did the idiot finally see the error of his ways?" she asked.

Niko hung his head and sat on his mattress in the middle of the living room. "My thesis advisor is not an idiot. He's just—"

"Stop defending *the idiot*. You've got a brilliant idea and he is being an idiot. I mean, does he even *know* the history of penicillin or oh, I don't know, flight? Did you *tell* him that you solved the search algorithm thing... for bacteria... thingy?"

"You mean the algorithm that allows my nanobots to identify the bacteria of the host and consume it as an energy source."

"Yes, that."

"I didn't even get that far," said Niko with a heavy sigh, his arms at his side. "It doesn't matter. I can't get passed his fear or need to conform or whatever it is. He won't listen. Maybe my ideas *aren't* that good."

"Don't!" she said, staunchly. "Firstly, he *is* an idiot. I even saw his idiot certificate on TalkItNow. He's an official idiot."

"Stop with the idiot stuff," said Niko.

After a moment of hesitation, she replied, "Okay.



But don't doubt yourself. Remember that saying, 'The one can be right and the hundred wrong.' That's what you always say to me. You're right and the thousand are wrong."

Niko rubbed his face. "I didn't think you were ever listening."

"You need to remember that you're ten times smarter than any of these guys. You have to be because that's what I tell all my friends. You don't want *me* to look like an idiot, do you?" she asked.

A humble smirk forced its way onto his face. "You know, I'm sure none of your friends talk like this. Go back to being a kid."

"For the record, my friends talk like I do, but age has nothing on mental strength. LOOK AT THESE BRAIN MUSCLES!" She jumped into the room, flexing her string-bean arms and pointing to her head, before dashing back into the bedroom.

Niko smiled and shook his head. "You're going to be late."

"See what happens when I reveal the kid inside? It's not pretty." There was more rustling in the bedroom. "You're going to do this nanobots stuff, I know it. You always say how were born to explore this stuff, how you want to go beyond the limits of... of the human..."

"Limits of the human architecture," he replied.



“That. You’re going to find a way to do this,” she said. “I’ve got faith in you. This much!”

“You know I can’t see your actual arms,” he yelled. “Anyway, it’s not that easy.” He closed his eyes, his hands smoothing his long, wet hair, reinforcing the little puddle that had started on the mattress. He felt a kiss on the top of his head and a bounce on and off the mattress.

“Maybe it is. I’ll be back before dinner.”

He nodded, waiting for the door to slam. When it didn’t, he looked up.

“Hey,” she cooed, her voice easily dodging all of his defenses. She was hidden in the doorway’s shadow, only a Cheshire cat smile and glinting eyes visible. “You’ve taken care of us this far. I know we’re going to be okay and I know this is going to happen. Forward or nothing! I believe in you.”

He waved her off. As the door closed, he lay back on the mattress and stared at the peeling ceiling. “I’m glad *you* do.” Forcing himself up, he opened the dresser drawer and took out the offer letter. Biting his lip, he went into the kitchen and with hands shaking, burned it in the sink. “Forward or nothing.”

CHAPTER THREE

SEMINAL MOMENT

The next three days crawled by, with only the erratic weather providing any distraction. Each night Niko slept less, and the knots in his stomach tightened. He fought hard to keep his worlds separate, offering smiles at home, and keeping his worry and fury for the campus battlefield.

“Hey Niko,” said a red-head, making him suddenly aware that he was on campus, and that there were dozens of people milling about.

“Oh, hey Andrea,” he replied with a quick nod, his hands resting on his father’s old backpack’s resewn straps. They’d met a few times at graduate student events.

“You okay?” she inquired.

“Yeah, you’re all hunched over,” said a woman with mocha colored skin, short curly black hair, and a beautiful square jaw. “You look like you’re carrying quite the burden. I’m Phoebe Collins,” she said, putting her forearm out.



Andrea stared at them in surprise. "You guys don't know each other? How's that possible?"

Niko completed the greeting and knocked forearms with her. "Niko Rafaelo." He scratched his face. "I think we've seen each a few times at grad functions. Just... I don't know. I'm not great at the people stuff."

Phoebe smiled in response.

"Niko's a Ph.D. candidate in Informatics. Nanotech, right?" asked Andrea.

He nodded.

"I'm a candidate in Sciences; Advanced immunology and analytics group," said Phoebe.

"Ah," replied Niko, somewhat interested. "Well, pleased to meet you."

He was about to leave when Andrea asked. "Are you going to the Edge of Humanity lecture by that visiting professor later? I think it might still be your kind of thing. Yoshi wanted me to mention it to you."

Niko stared at the ground for a moment. "Doctor Martin Curie, right?"

"Yeah," replied Phoebe. "I've read quite a few of his books, and several of his papers. This talk is one where he summarizes the ways various sciences and eras have looked at a topic. In this case, it's the human body. He believes it's an open system, still adapting."

Niko scratched his head, "Hmm. I'll need to make

arrangements first. He might have some interesting points on the microbial cloud. Maybe he could answer some of the questions no one wants to answer." He nodded. "Okay, I'll try to make it." He headed off.

"Odd cookie, but nice guy," said Andrea.

"Hmm," replied Phoebe, pulling on her brown string, three bead, necklace.

"Oh, oh, no. Not that type of hmm. He's guarded by Cerberus."

Phoebe laughed. "Is he in the Greek underworld or something?"

"I'll explain," said Andrea with a smile. "Come on. I've got a class to give. We'll talk on the way."



Doctor Martin Curie took a sip of water and looked at the room. He didn't care that it was only a quarter filled, he got paid the same amount either way. Fewer people just meant less idiotic questions, in his mind. He'd been on a lecture tour for the past six months, presenting to most of the remaining colleges in the eastern states.

As if his autopilot had suddenly disengaged, he gazed out at the crowd in momentary confusion. He glanced over to see what the holo-screen was showing and quickly continued, with only a few beats missed. "So lastly, there's the microbial cloud. Discovered, and I use the term loosely, in the early days of the twenty-



first century. This was seen as a potential source of all kinds of things, information in particular. There was a belief that it could be used to accurately determine whether or not someone had been in a room, provided they were in it for say an hour or so, and provided the room wasn't too large... or had any ventilation, et cetera." He shook his head. "It boggles my mind sometimes at how readily grant money was given away once upon a time. Anyway, I digress. They were able to differentiate between the dust, clothing particles in the cloud, and the bacteria which did contain the DNA signature of the host individual. That was interesting, but despite the problem of needing ideal conditions to do anything with that information, there was a litany of other issues of significant concern: one of my favorites was being unable to differentiate between someone having been in the room and someone having used a spraying device to simulate it." He paused, shaking his head. "And that entire problem space would end up pretty much solved by the societal embrace of drones. We take for granted that they are our postal couriers, law enforcement eyes and ears, truant officers and more. I've even seen prototypes of them for enforcing corporate policies, nicknamed nanny-drones. Thus, the chances that something occurs without any eyes capturing it are very slim these days." He leaned on the hundred-year-old lectern and stared at the drowsy



crowd. Oddly, there was one enthused gentleman with a scruffy beard who kept glancing at the top right corner of his presentation, where the time was. He looked like a frog in a pot hoping to get out before the official boiling time.

“So that brings us to the question,” continued the professor, “can we take the next step off the edge of humanity? We’ve tried many ways over the course of human history to extend ourselves and failed. Perhaps it is solely the domain of time, and whether you call it evolution or environmental adaptation doesn’t matter.”

He smiled expectantly at the crowd, but they stared back at him blankly. Furrowing his brow, he said, “Often at this point, I get some student who brings up cyborgs, and artificial intelligence, and other dreams of the by-gone era. We’ve all learned, the more prosthetics, the exponentially harder a system it is to manage on behalf of the individual or along with the individual. Thus, no killer cyborgs from the books I so enjoyed as a youth. And what about artificial intelligence? Well, other than reasonably good assistive technology, they get to keep those killer cyborgs company in fiction.” He paused, expecting more than the mild amount of chuckles. A hand went up. Professor Curie frowned. He’d informed them at the beginning that all questions were to be held until the end. It was the bearded man who didn’t want to



be boiled.

The professor shook his head and then was about to continue when the man stood up and blurted out, "Professor Curie, I have a question."

"I can see that, but now is *not* the time. Wait until the end of the lecture," he replied. He then seemed to recognize the young man.

"I'm running out of time. I need to get home for seven o'clock."

He grumbled. "Does it really need to be stated that in this situation, someone in my position does not have to abide by anyone else's timetable but their own? I don't care what your question is."

"That's Niko Rafaelo," said someone in the crowd.

"I figured," replied the professor. "I was actually warned about him." He made eye contact with Niko. "You have quite the reputation Mister Rafaelo, and I mean that in the strictly negative sense."

Niko hesitated, glancing over at Phoebe and Andrea a few seats away. Phoebe seemed curious what Niko would say, whereas Andrea was clearly embarrassed. While Niko had been disruptive before, and subsequently warned about doing so, he'd never been so explicit about it.

Professor Curie folded his arms and put on an expression of one ready to do academic battle. "Go on, Mister Rafaelo. Please, share with everyone. What is

so *vital*—” he shook his fist in the air “that you feel the absolute need to derail my lecture and be so rude to everyone?”

Swallowing and then licking his lips, Niko replied, “Assuming that one could separate the dust and other particles in the microbial cloud from the human bacteria, do you believe there are enough bacteria that a nanobot could derive sufficient energy from a cluster of them within—”

“Stop,” said the professor waving his hands. “Just stop. You’re embarrassing yourself, Mister Rafaelo.”

Niko clenched his jaw. “I didn’t even get to—”

“You’re layering bad premise on top of bad premise. I feel sorry for you that no one has set you straight, at least I can do some social good here. The matter of separating the bacteria from the other particles, in real-time, for a particular nanobot would be so energy intense that should you even have a magical way of consuming bacteria in a highly efficient manner, they would spend all of their time hunting and eating. The entire structure of the nanobot would be solely devoted to that end.”

“No but—”

“I am *not* finished. I’ve seen what you posted on TalkItNow, that they would then serve to provide all kinds of fantastical services, to have a communications network leveraging an individual’s



natural magnetic field, et cetera, et cetera. If you were a science fiction writer, I'd call you brilliant. But as a technologist and researcher? You're deluded to the point of damaging your college's reputation."

Niko's face flushed as everyone turned to him, many started to whisper. He caught sight of many watches and phones coming out, likely posting thoughts and snarky comments to TalkItNow. "But I already have the algorithm."

"Really? Is it tested?" snapped the professor. "Do you have actual, concrete evidence? Do you have a nanobot design that is so beyond what the world has ever seen, that it can be hyper-efficient at consuming bacteria *and* be able to do some other function? No? Is that what I'm understanding from your lack of reply? Thank you very much for the detour down imaginary lane, but the rest of us are going to get back to my lecture. If you'd be so kind, please leave." The professor stepped back behind the lectern. "Any time now, Mister Rafaelo."

Niko nodded. He glanced over at Andrea and Phoebe. Andrea had her back partially to him, whereas Phoebe was looking at him, her expression blank. Slowly he made his way out. He kept touching his forehead as he did so.

Once the lecture was over, Phoebe headed directly for Niko's office. She wasn't surprised he wasn't there.



She couldn't imagine how mortifying it had been to be him in the seminar, and if she were him, she'd want to hide too.

After checking a couple other student-favorite hiding spots in the building, she decided to head back to her office. As she crossed the campus' underground courtyard, she spotted the lone apple tree, the centerpiece of the high ceiling, indoor garden. "You know, I wouldn't be surprised if he was hoping for an apple to the head for inspiration." She laughed as she saw Niko sitting on the other side of it, all of his papers, tablets and other stuff spread out.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "Didn't you have to be home for seven?"

"Have you seen the wind storm outside? The city's on lock-down. No transition, emergency vehicles only, you know the routine. I called my landlord to take care of... my obligation," he replied mechanically, continuing to work feverishly.

Phoebe glanced about the courtyard, "I hate being so cut off from the outside."

"It's just like the outside, but better."

"No, it's like... pretend outside."

"The outside gets soggy a lot," said Niko.

"Still, I'd rather be out there."

"I think the key is mindset," said Niko, looking up. "Life is an illusion, isn't it? All the elements here



seem the same as the way things supposedly once were, from natural light to birds to even some insects. It's us that decides whether or not we want to accept the limits or push passed them."

"No, it's not. I appreciate all of this, but I'd rather be in the real world, than in a concrete pretend one."

Niko stared at her for a moment, absorbing her point, and then turned back to his work.

"Hey, Niko?"

He didn't react.

She snapped her fingers. "Hey, Niko."

He glanced up for a second, before returning to his work. "Yeah, Phoebe. I'm here."

"Are you okay? You took a pretty severe beating in there." She gestured to the direction she'd come from.

"Yeah well... welcome to my life. But that's in the past. No need to worry about yesterday, today, right?"

"Yesterday? That was today." She put a hand on his forehead. "No fever."

He pulled away. "Please don't do that. I'm... I'm not comfortable with people doing that."

"Yeah, well, tough. You need to unplug from this and be a person. If anyone knows anything about hiding in their work, it's me."

Niko frowned and then relented. "I'm fine. Separate worlds. Everything's fine."

“No, it’s not,” she said, taking him by the hand. He gazed up at her, confused.

“I’m buying you a cup of coffee or a can of Ace or whatever. Get in your mental spacesuit because you need to leave your world. Consider this a trans-dimensional... dammit, I lost it there.”

Niko laughed and collected his things. “That was pretty good, though. Really.”

“It was, wasn’t it?” she replied, pushing her hair back with a smile. “Oh, one question. Do you really have a guardian named Cerberus?”

“What?” he asked, all packed up and ready to go. “Sorry, didn’t hear you.”

“Never mind. Come on.”

Phoebe laughed so hard she snorted. “Oh flood!” She covered her face as she went red. “Good thing the cafe is practically empty.”

A relaxed smile spread across Niko’s face.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I don’t know. You’re just... different,” he said. “I usually only get listened to at home.”

“Different how?” she inquired, playing with the two green and single, middle white bead on her necklace.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Everyone else just seems so... I don’t know. I’m not good at explaining



this stuff.”

Phoebe laughed again.

“What?” asked Niko, a look of self-consciousness on his face.

“You spent twenty minutes explaining to me, in detail, how the nanobots would work. And yet, you cannot explain how I’m different?”

He toyed with his empty cup and lightly scratched his forehead. “They are different knowledge domains. Different reasoning systems, different vocabulary and grammars and...” he let out a sigh of defeat. “You’re smart, and you laugh, and you don’t give me the confused look whenever I open my mouth. Is that better?” He looked up at her, his eyes those of a vulnerable kid.

She smiled. “I’ll accept that. My dad’s like that, master of some domains, fumbler of others.” She took a final sip of her coffee. “Anyway, you were talking about innovation.”

In a blink, Niko’s face lit up again. “So the problem is, how does one shift the societal mindset from being afraid of the unknown and new, towards real innovation once again? I mean, yes, there are startups that are creating things that haven’t existed before, but they aren’t solving big issues or taking risks. They are making whatever is there and then adding one to it, if you know what I mean. And their

entire focus is on making more money for some people, or helping other people lose less money. There's no innovation there, it's just financial displacement. What about up-ending how we think about ourselves and our world? I get that we can't go to the moon anymore, but even if someone just focused on bringing back things we could do decades ago, like video calling, *that* would be something. But instead, everyone talks about how TalkItNow is the pinnacle of modern innovation. TalkItNow! You can't get more a literal example of what's old is new again than them. An online destination where people can post things and discuss whatever they want. Maybe the world had a tremendous need for posting pictures of cats after a fifty-year gap. Maybe I'm the one who doesn't get it." He rubbed his face vigorously.

Phoebe smiled and leaned back in her chair.

"Am I making any sense? Sometimes I feel like it only makes sense in here," he said, tapping his temple.

"It makes complete sense. I still can't get over you taking apart micro-factories and building nanobots at the age of seventeen."

Niko raised a finger. "You understand that the initial micro-factories were really for microbots, right? They were almost a thousand times bigger than what I have now. That point didn't help the inventor though, neither did Japan being liberal on the issue. No one



would touch the product, no matter how harmless he said they were.”

Phoebe nodded. “Niko, you treat that part of your story like everyone does stuff like that. It’s amazing, and you don’t think anything of it.”

Niko shrugged.

“How many generations of micro-factories have you gone through since you started?”

“Forty-two. I call the latest one Douglas,” he said with a wry smile.

She stared at him blankly.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I’ve never even heard of a micro-factory before today,” she confessed.

“Well, there *were* only ten. The inventor, Hiro Hamada, wanted to teach kids with them. He created ten of them, hoping to reignite his career in his twilight years, but passed away shortly after. He’s one of my heroes. He dared to yell at the world that we shouldn’t retreat from innovation, that we didn’t have to just focus on the here and now.”

“So how did you get them?”

“My mom ran across an article he’d posted, trying to find something that would intrigue me. She was a lead industrial robotics engineer, so she liked the idea of us having a connection, like my dad and brother did. So, she bought me one of the kits from his



widow... It arrived a few days after they had... ah... they'd all... it came after the funeral by courier-drone." Niko fought off the emotion that wanted to invade the moment. With a sigh, he continued. "I used part of my inheritance to buy the other nine. I spent almost every waking moment for months understanding exactly how they worked, learning Japanese along the way. I wrote to the inventor's widow, and she sent me all of his notebooks. It was like oxygen to my soul. It filled half of my life with purpose. Then the other half was filled in by—"

"How are we doing on time?" interrupted Phoebe, a look of guilt on her face.

Niko grabbed his old cellphone and motioned it to wake up. "Ah, terribly. I have to get home."

Phoebe stood up and collected her things. "This was fun. We should do it again."

Niko nodded and then caught the look in her eye. "Oh."

"Is there a problem?" she asked.

He stared at his phone. "No. No, just... I have some complexity in my life," his expression twisted to one of discomfort.

"Oh," she replied, disappointed.

Niko glanced up. "No, it's not a girlfriend. It's... She's very protective of me. She's... kind of ended a few relationships I've attempted in the past."



Phoebe raised her eyebrows. "So we're in the preliminaries of a relationship, then?" She smiled as Niko's face went red, his expression flustered.

"No... it's. I better go," he said collecting his things. A well-dressed woman with long braided hair immediately stopped him.

"Mister Rafaelo. I'm thankful you're not a hard man for the sweepers to find. Did you know it was another grad student, one who was having trouble finding a thesis like you, who invented them? Miniature drones, limited abilities and not of commercial interest, but helpful here on campus for things like finding people." She glanced up at the high ceiling as one of them whizzed by. "I'm sure you could have done something like that." There was a finality to her statement that sent a chill through Niko.

Phoebe and Niko both recognized the Dean of Informatics.

"Dean, why are you here?" asked Phoebe, worried.

Niko stared at the Dean, his mouth suddenly dry and his hands sweaty.

"I bumped into Doctor Curie. Martin was furious."

Niko was about to reply when the Dean raised her hand to silence him, and was stunned to see him ignore it. "At every turn, I'm trying to do exactly what

you and this college committed to when you accepted me into the program. I'm trying to innovate. I'm trying to bring the best of who I am to the table. Yet at every turn—"

"That's enough, Mister Rafaelo," she said firmly.

"No, it's not," said Niko, sensing he was passing a point of no return. "The idea for my thesis is as good if not better than any—"

"That's it, you're done," said the Dean softly. "I was conflicted with what to do, but you certainly made the decision easy. You have until the end of the week to clean out your desk and make room for the next candidate."

"What?" said Phoebe, as she watched Niko's expression collapse. "No. No, you—"

"He's done, Ms. Collins. Please don't get involved. As Mr. Rafaelo is famous for saying, he likes to keep his worlds separate, so let this be separate, shall we?" She turned and left.

"Oh my god. I'm so sorry, Niko," said Phoebe, rubbing his arm.

He was white as a sheet, sweat beading on his forehead. He stared at her with the eyes of a terrified, cornered animal.

"Niko? Niko, listen to me," she said, taking his hand. "Sit, okay? Sit and let's talk. Okay?"

Niko's chin quivering, he shook his head. "I need



to go. I need to get home. This world's a mess."

"Can I check on you later?" she asked.

He turned and dragged himself off.

"Niko?"

CHAPTER FOUR

INFLUENCE OF PEERS

The office door slid open. A tattoo-headed man of slim build and big eyes looked up from his desk and holo-screen. “Oh, hey Niko. You look like extra crispy crap this morning.”

“I’m finished, Yoshi,” replied Niko, stepping into their closet of an office. He slumped into his chair. His desk and Yoshi’s were side by side.

Yoshi bit his lip and nodded. “I heard a rumor.”

Niko rubbed his face. “Yeah, rumor. I didn’t sleep last night, not like I was getting much anyway. I’m sure that your thesis advisor is going to be ecstatic when he gets back.

“I kept going over and over things. I don’t know what we’re going to do. I think I’m going to have to accept the offer. I don’t know what else to do.”

Yoshi whistled his surprise. “You? Working at TalkItNow as a senior developer?” He put a finger to



his head. “Bang, done. No way. Maybe if you’re drugged-out or something, but you’d never survive. You’d eat your brain.”

Niko’s hands failed to gesture and instead, dropped to his side. “What am I going to do? All the inheritance from my parents is long gone. I can’t just think about myself.”

“I know. You’re a noble soul,” said Yoshi, his eyes sympathetic. They’d joined the Ph.D. program at the same time, and were the closest thing to what either of them thought of as a friend. “You’re doing the right thing”

“Well then why does life just seem to keep beating me up for it?” asked Niko, shaking his head.

“Nah, man. My dad would say that you are to suffer so that you can appreciate the gifts to come,” said Yoshi, doing his bad Japanese accent, and making Niko smirk.

“How can you be half-Japanese and not nail that?”

“I have many talents,” replied Yoshi.

Niko leaned forward and bumped elbows with him.

Yoshi swiveled his chair and looked at the painted wall. “Maybe the red is all wrong, you know? Maybe it needs not to give into the white to become pink, but become the yellow.”

“Are you just screwing around looking for some

philosophy?" asked Niko.

"Was worth a try," he replied with a grin.

"It was," said Niko with a grin, standing back up. "Well, I have until Friday to clear out my half of this garbage dump." He shook his head at their mess. He then noticed how Yoshi was dressed. "That a new skirt? Hey wait, did I see—"

"Yeah, we're matching."

"Did she pick the outfits or did you?" asked Niko.

"She did," replied Yoshi with a smile.

"That's great. So it's working okay between you guys?"

"Hey man, if I have my way. I get this stupid gesture pad algorithm improvement done, marry her, and move to nowhere and live a good life."

"That sounds nice," replied Niko tapping the door frame.

"Not for you. You, you need to be bigger than life. If you aren't, I'm going to hunt you down in ten years and kick your butt. You got me?"

Niko nodded, tired. He tapped the door frame again, and left.



"Hey Niko," yelled Phoebe to the man blazing a trail across the soggy campus.

He stopped dead and glanced up, wondering if one of the police-drones or sweepers had called him



out. After a moment, he realized there was the dark, curly haired woman coming towards him. "Oh. Hey, Phoebe."

"You're looking a bit better. Everything okay?" she asked.

"No," he answered drily.

"Oh," replied Phoebe. "Listen, I was thinking. Your idea on the microbial cloud elements. It sounded pretty well thought through. Is it? Is it core to your whole idea?"

Niko frowned. "Well, I don't know. What are you getting at?"

Phoebe glared at him. "Just... just answer the question. Did you build something or have anything that would show it's more than just a random thing you said to me?"

"I built a prototype of about a half-dozen nanobots that demonstrate how my algorithm for finding bacteria and consuming it works. Does that count?"

A smile crept across Phoebe's face. "Great. Now, does that have to be in the Informatics faculty, or is there enough organic elements to this that it could fit in Sciences? Because the Dean of Science *famously* hates the Dean of Informatics."

Niko's eyes came alive. "Oh geezes, you're right." He bolted, yelling back, "Thanks Phoebe!"



The office door slid open and Dean of Informatics peered in. She detested how small the offices were, and was even more bothered by how the grad students treated them.

“Hello Yoshi,” said the Dean. “It’s been a while.”

“Dean,” he replied, glancing up from his holo-screen.

“How’s the new gesture pad enhancement coming along? I’m having lunch with the donations VP from the company today. I was wondering if I could share anything with him.”

“I think I’ll have it ready for work by the next checkpoint date. Just doing the simulation work before I get hands on,” he replied, pointing at a mess on the shelf above his desk. “I’ve got better power efficiency and sharper recognition. I think it’ll make it able to work as a general use device. Heck, I think I could even use it for developing software. Odd to think this thing’s not really changed in twenty years.”

“What a weird era we live in, sometimes. But I’m glad to hear the news.” She frowned and pointed at Niko’s desk. “He hasn’t cleared out yet?”

“No,” replied Yoshi. “Why would he?”

The Dean sighed. “Yoshi, you are bad at pretending to be out of the loop. I’m sure you heard that Mister Rafaelo will not be continuing with our graduate program.” She pulled back her sleeve and



looked at her watch. "Given that it's already four o'clock on Friday, I would have expected he'd have had the courtesy to clean out by now. But then again, I understand how hard this is for him. The new candidate is coming in on Monday, however. I'd like to have it cleaned before then."

Yoshi smiled quizzically. "Well, um, there would seem to be a complication then."

"And that is?" she asked, amused at the prospect.

"Niko was accepted into the Science Ph.D. program yesterday evening."

The Dean frowned and then laughed. "Hilarious. Based on what?"

Yoshi's face lit up. "Oh, I'm quite serious. When he broke down the constituent elements of his thesis, and its integration with the microbial cloud, the Dean of Science felt that there was significant innovation there, never mind on the nanobots side. It met the criteria the college sets out for such rare cases, so it was granted."

Folder her arms, the Dean thought, stroking the side of her face. "Sounds like a bunch of hand-waving. All just so she can try to show me up? Huh."

"Well, either way, he was granted funding this morning."

"Going to her was a dangerous move, but gutsy, I'll give him that. I don't think it'll save him, or the



tarnish he'll bring to this college, but it'll be on her. I respect his tenacity."

"If I may say, Dean, I think we missed out on an opportunity that's going to change the world. But at least the college will get some credit."

"Are you saying that because you're his friend, or because you've seen something?"

Yoshi hesitated, unsure if he was stepping into the realm of politics. "I think this is the part where we all become witnesses to history."

Eighteen Months Later

Niko stepped into the seminar room ready to defend his doctoral thesis. He was out of breath and his pants were soaking below the knees. He'd barely made it into the building before the automatic flood lock-down kicked in.

Exhaling hard to calm his nerves, he looked about. Everything was officially laid out. Having been in the audience of doctoral defenses before, it seemed weirdly different now that it was his turn.

There were two large holo-screens setup, one on either side of the vintage lectern. He glanced about and smiled as he realized it was the very room Doctor Curie had presented in. Spotting Yoshi and Phoebe among those in the audience chairs, he gave them a



wave. He then turned his attention to the long table for the panelists. To his bewilderment, he saw Doctor Curie.

He scratched his trimmed beard, and then smoothed his neat, short hair. Shaking off the disaster scenarios that started to build up in his head, he walked over to the professor and put his hand out.

The professor stared at it, and finished putting down his leather satchel. Straightening up and sporting a smile, he shook Niko's hand firmly. "Mister Rafaelo, I wouldn't have taken you for a shaker. Mind you, I didn't take you for a brilliant man at first, either."

Niko's response failed him, as he took in the final statement. After a moment, he found a reply, "My mom was the one who taught me about handshaking, and its place in the world. Forearm bumps are fine for avoiding germs, but there's history in hands."

"There is. I also see that you were rather determined in getting here," said the doctor, pointing at Niko's pant-legs.

Niko glanced down, alarm spreading across his face. "I had to make sure everything was good at home and—"

"You look fine. Those wet pants are a mark of pride and determination these days, if you ask me. Don't let it distract you." He leaned in. "When I had to

defend my thesis, I had the most horrible itch on my face. It was maddening, but I still got through it. You'll be fine."

Niko smiled and nodded. "I can't believe this is actually happening."

"Well, I'm looking forward to your presentation, and how you manage to defend some of your claims. Compared to most, your paper was particularly well-written. And for the record, I did appreciate the thoroughness of the data you included with your analysis. It's rare for anyone to do that anymore."

"Thanks," replied Niko. He noticed two people in business suits walk in and take up seats at the far end of the panel table.

"Who are they?" he asked Doctor Curie.

Looking over his shoulder, he replied, "They are from the college's investment fund."

Niko squinted and looked at the doctor, uncertain. "Why would they be here?"

"I called them," he said, uncomfortably. "With the support of both the Deans of Informatics and Sciences, I might add." He put his hands in his pockets and bowed his head. "I have a confession to make, Mister Rafaelo. My... issues with you didn't end the day of my seminar, or with my tirade in front of the Dean of Informatics. When I learned you'd switched faculties, I sent a letter of... anti-recommendation. I've known



the Dean of Science for decades. She's been perfect for the college, and I urged her to reconsider. I was certain she was making a mistake, but in her defense, she wouldn't listen to a word of it." He put his hand up defensively. "I am not proud of it. My marriage was falling apart. I was angry at the world. Shortly afterwards, I had a divorce and heart attack. I was a man adrift.

"When the Dean of Science asked me to read one of the early drafts of your completed thesis, I reluctantly accepted. To cut the rest short, the presence of the investment fund representatives is my way of saying I believe your ideas have real merit."

"Wow. Thank you," said Niko, rubbing his forehead in disbelief.

"Show me you can change the world. I think we could all use some excitement to distract us from Nature's vengeance."

A young girl stepped into the room, clearly out of place. Niko smiled and pointed to the audience seating. She nodded and followed his direction, glaring at Phoebe as she walked by.

Niko took his place at the front of the room.

CHAPTER FIVE

FUNDING

One Year Later

Niko stuck his hand out and smiled. “Thanks for coming, Sandra.”

The woman standing on the other side of the office threshold was in her mid-twenties. She was dressed like him, in casual pants and a long t-shirt with a forgettable saying. Her striking face gave hints of her Columbian roots, and her shoulder length hair showed a passing interest in style on some level.

Glancing at his hand, and then up at his face, she cautiously shook his hand. “I wouldn’t have expected that. A bit old world, isn’t it?”

“Why does everyone have that reaction? It’s not like I’m trying to put fingers in your ears... Also, I don’t offer it to everyone,” said Niko, his nostrils flaring.

Sandra stared at him. “Do you explain everything like that or only when you’re nervous?”



Niko's cheeks reddened.

"Nervous it is," she said with a smile.

He motioned for her to step into the single room office.

The room was a hallmark of the old downtown. The walls and ceiling were cracked plaster, water stains on the ceiling. The window had weather-beaten bulletproof glass with a set of thick black cables coming down through it. Occupying most of the room was a large butcher block table and a misfit collection of five chairs. Two developers were standing between the table and the window, back to back. Their wall-mounted holo-screens were dirty, with exposed wires, clearly on their last legs. Sandra caught a glimpse of them glitching. The developers were oblivious to her presence; their gargantuan headsets keep them immersed in their own worlds.

She felt like she was standing in a weird mix of the past fifty years, instead of the office of a high-tech startup company. "What are the cables for?" she asked, sitting on a well-worn, plastic chair.

Niko glanced around, before relaxing and taking a seat. "Supplementary power. The community electrical grid around here is nonexistent, so we're tied into the main. And the main isn't very reliable as you might guess."

"It's like a kid playing with a light switch in my

neighborhood," said Sandra. "What did you put on the roof?"

"Armored solar charging batteries. We use a pessimistic protection scheme, so at the slightest sign of problematic weather, they clam up."

Sandra sat back and stared at the window. "That costs a pretty penny."

"We... ah, spent about half our initial seed money on it."

She squinted at him. "Okay, I just need to ask. Are you insane?"

"No, but given the micro-factories we're powering, we need constant, clean power, and it's worth it. Well, I hope it will have been worth it."

"At least you're an honest nut."

Sandra noticed a few books piled on the corner of the table, along with an open sketch book and a worn, little tub of lip balm. "You don't strike me as the type to be reading *Breadcrumb Trail*."

"Great book, but that's not mine."

"Another member of the team? Because I'm guessing it's not theirs either," she said gesturing at the two developers.

Niko's expression hardened. "No."

"Then who?" she asked, leaning forward.

He grimaced and stared at the floor. "I've been experimenting with that world overlap with the one



for here. Moving on.”

“Hang on a second, worlds?” asked Sandra, staring at him.

Niko continued to stare downwards, his fingers twitching as he searched for the words.

One of the developers pulled his headset off an ear, but kept his eyes focused on the holographic images hovering above the screen. “It’s what he calls the different parts of his life. Important project? That’s a world. Office life? World. Personal life? That’s a world too. He’s a master at it.”

The other developer piped up. “We think there’s eight or so. It’s freaky sometimes. He’ll flip from angry to calm and back, depending on its context. You get used to it.”

“It’s emotionally and intellectually efficient. Nothing different than having different notebooks or files or boards,” said Niko, his lips tight, glaring at them. The developers got back to work.

“Emotionally expensive, isn’t it?” asked Sandra.

Niko stared at her.

“We can move on,” she said.

He pulled back his sleeve and woke up the contraption on his forearm. “It’s three o’clock, so she’ll probably drop by sooner rather than later... We better get the interview moving.”

“She who? The one the books belong to?”

"I'm letting my worlds touch, not cross."

Sandra shrugged. "Okay, whatever."

"Do you have any questions about the job?"

Sandra scanned about the small office. "Aren't you supposed to ask me a lot of questions first and then ask that at the end of the interview?"

He scratched his head. "Oh, am I? I've never had a job interview before."

"What about them?"

Niko looked back at the two developers. "Their contractors. I showed them code, and asked if they could explain it to me. They failed horribly, but better than the others, so I hired them as contractors. You, you wouldn't be a contractor."

"Oh," replied Sandra, sitting back.

Niko's face light up. "Ah, I do have a question. What are we trying to do here? I sent you the five pager. You tell me."

"Ah... by the way, that technical briefing was very dense, and you really should have people sign a non-disclosure before getting it."

Niko shrugged. "One of the angel investors is having someone draw that up, but I don't have time to waste. And granted, if most people could make sense of what it said, that would be a concern. Most people get lost part way through page one, jump to the middle of page two, then to the end to see if it



makes any more sense to them. None of that helps. So what did it say?"

Sandra clasped her hands and stared at him, and leaned on the table. "Basically, you want everyone to be able to interact with the world around them as if it was magical. You want taxis to come with a thought, messages to get written and sent with a few gestures, and... I don't know."

His expression was stoic, he leaned back and waited.

She noticed a hand-drawn sign stuck to the back wall. "KnowMe. That's going to be the company name, isn't it?"

Niko leaned forward. "Why would you think that?"

"Because really, you're after having the world know the person the NanoCloud's on. And for them to be able to know the world around them more."

"Huh," replied Niko, nodding gently. "Anything else?"

"I do have a question," said Sandra.

"Go ahead."

Tilting her head and thinking through the question first, she asked, "Why was the time on your forearm thing set to an hour ahead?"

"Hire her," said one of the developers, glancing over to Niko and then putting his headset back on.

Niko smirked. "I think we just might."

One Month Later

Sandra glanced across the table at Niko, and then over at the two developers standing at their workstations. She thought it was funny that she and Niko both liked their old-school worlds of gesture-enhanced keyboards and portable holo-screens, even if they were bought from an old college lab.

A gentle alarm sounded. Niko pulled the sleeve back and checked the message.

"I still can't believe that you lug that thing around. You could just use a cellphone you know."

"Like I keep saying, I need to force myself out of the paradigm that we're used to. If I use a cellphone all the time, it's going to shape all my thinking. With this, and I fully recognize that I've incorporated a phone into it, but it makes me think differently. At home I have one setup like the old goggle interfaces."

Sandra grinned and shook her head. "You think it up, I'll build it. Well, me and these clowns."

The two guys raised their hands and waved.

Niko read the message and leaned back, his tongue running around his teeth.

"That's an expression I'm not used to," said Sandra.



He stared at her, and scratched his beard. "I've been asked by Simon, the rep for our angel investors, to come to a funding meeting."

Sandra's face lit up. "That's great, when?"

"Now. I don't like it. Every other meeting we've had, they've given me at least several days' notice, usually a week or so."

"But you said that no one's stepped into the ring for the next round of investment yet."

He stared at his armband. "No, they haven't." He flipped his arm over and unstrapped his device.

"Why are you doing that?" she asked.

Niko carefully put it on the table. "This gets more questions in meetings than it's worth. *Is that one of your devices? When are you releasing it? Are the nanobots inside it?* And so on. Not worth the hassle." He turned his piercing gaze on her. "I want you to come to the meeting."

"Now?"

"Yes," replied Niko.

She laughed. "Seriously? I've only been here a month."

"You're my number one. You got those guys to change their ways. You even got me following your coding standards."

"Sometimes," she added.

He smiled. "Are you up for it?"

“Lead on, MacDuff,” she said, noticing the Shakespeare plays in the stack of books on the edge of the table.

The elevator door opened and Sandra and Niko stepped out, chatting away.

“You seriously think that in another hundred years, elevators are really still going to be the same?” asked Sandra.

“Some problems are considered solved. There’s no innovation to be had. Efficiencies yes, but innovation? No. They’ve become an embedded part of the human psyche and it will take a serious change to dislodge that notion. It’s just like with— oh, hey, Simon. What are you doing here?” Niko stopped and stared at the excited young man with the slicked-back, shoulder-length blond hair.

“Double collar *and* a y-split tie? Suit? What’s going on?” asked Niko, frowning and taking a step back.

Simon’s grin couldn’t get any bigger. “I didn’t want to spoil the news, but I wanted to give you a heads up just before we start. They’re all here.”

“Who?” asked Sandra, glancing back and forth between Niko and Simon. Their expressions were dueling.

“We haven’t met, I’m Simon Malo. I work for the angel investors of KnowMe. They call themselves the



Trio, because, as you might expect, there are three of them. Niko only gets to see them once a quarter or so?"

"If I'm lucky," replied Niko.

"Otherwise, he gets to see me on a monthly or sometimes semi-monthly basis. And for these types of meetings, I'm usually the Trio's representatives. That is, except for today. This was big enough that they felt it only right that they be here in person."

Sandra smiled. "I'm—"

With a patronizing smile, Simon waved her off. "Oh, I know who you are, Sandra. Anyway, everyone's waiting for you in the conference room just over there. With the new money this should bring in, we won't have to be renting random conference rooms in parts of a building, we'll be owning a building."

Niko raised an eyebrow and glanced at the shiny metal conference room door and then back the slick investment rep. "All three?"

"All three," replied Simon, teeth showing in his grin.

Niko shook his head and folded his arms. "But you didn't think to tell me to dress up today? And you didn't even give me an hour's notice. You *intentionally* gave me absolutely no notice, why? What's going on, Simon? Something's not fitting. If all three are in there, then there's no way this was setup at the last minute.



You've known about this for at least a few weeks."

Simon's professional grin shifted to a smug one. "He's a sharp man, your boss," he said to Sandra.

Sandra noticed Niko's shifting posture. "Why are we having funding meetings already? I thought we were good for at least six, maybe more months."

Rolling his eyes, Simon glanced at Niko who nodded towards Sandra. "Deals take time, the more time you have, the less desperate you come across, and so the better terms you can negotiate. Also, you might be able to find competing parties who will fight to be part of the deal, or both come in and give you a stronger position. Six months of cash is almost out of money in startup terms."

"Now come on. They've been talking for an hour already and—"

Niko closed his eyes and scratched his forehead. "Wait, they started without me? That's not the deal. They've never done that before."

"Ah..." Guilt was all over Simon's face.

As Simon and Niko continued talking, the sudden sliding of a door caught Sandra's eye. She looked over at the conference room, and saw a finely dressed woman her age standing there. The woman turned and stared at Sandra, and then at Niko. Her predatory gaze chilled Sandra to the bone. "Who is that?" she whispered.



Niko glanced over and froze, as his face went flush. He stopped himself from grabbing Simon by the collar.

Simon took a peek over his shoulder. He waved and smiled, the metallic door slid closed. "That's Harriet—"

"I know *exactly* who the flare that is," said Niko in a hushed voice. "You've got to be out of your flooding mind if you think we're having anything to do with her or that company." He ran a hand through his hair. "I can't believe you guys."

"Eversio Investments," said Simon, gritting his teeth, "is *the* biggest name in funding, period. How many companies do you think want to run the risk of being shut down by the government? Until you get all the certifications needed, what we are doing here is quasi-legal at best. Even then, it might not be enough. You should count your lucky stars we landed anyone, never mind them. You got struck by lightning to get seed money from the Trio, but to get the whale of whales? Eversio? That's like being struck twice more."

"Getting electrocuted would be preferable to having them anywhere near our company," said Niko, his hands shaking. "No."

"You don't get to choose who—"

"Simon!" snapped Niko. "I'm only going to say this once. Never in a million years will I work with

Eversio. Never in a million years will I be anywhere *near* Harriet Binger. Never will I allow her step-mother, Lucinda Feer, within a million miles of our technology. And for the record, do you have any idea what Eversio does? Because I've been keeping tabs on them for years."

Standing up straighter, Simon replied, "They make companies into superstars. They create *massive* shareholder value. Never mind the weight they have with key politicians. I can't believe how ungrateful you are. You should be jumping for joy."

Niko stepped right up to Simon's face. "They are toxic. They have no morals. They are like playing with fire when you're wearing a gasoline suit. They rip companies apart with no care or consequence. They use lawsuits like siege weapons to do what they want, when they want, and laugh at the fines for crossing legal lines. And don't try for an *instant* to tell me that that's just bad press, because I've seen it first-hand." He waved his hand angrily over their elevator's summoning sensor. "I can't believe you let them know we exist. It's like alerting the minotaur that you're in the labyrinth." He stepped into the elevator.

"Wait, where are you going?" asked Simon.

"I'm going to push my worlds apart and get back to work."

Simon put a hand over the elevator sensor.



“Worlds? What? Anyway, you are not going anywhere.” His face was red, sweat was beading on his brow. “Look, you’ve made your point that I shouldn’t have ambushed you with this, fine. However, you have a duty—”

Niko motioned for Sandra to join him.

She smiled at Simon. “I get the feeling we’re going. It was nice meeting you.” She gave him a small wave.

“Niko! This is about the future of your company.”

“I know,” he replied, staring at the ground. “I know that those people have no lines they won’t cross to drive their ambition. We’re done.”

“If you don’t go in there, you know they’ll fire me.” Simon curved his lips in.

Niko sighed and stared at the investor representative. He’d always found Simon overconfident. He regularly lauded his role over Niko, yet still Niko felt bad for him. “Simon, if you’d come to me when this was an idea, I could have explained why I don’t want to be within a lightyear of those people. Goodbye.” He carefully pushed Simon back and allowed the elevator to close. “I shouldn’t have let her come to the office. That world... that was too close,” he muttered to himself.

Sandra stood there, glancing at Niko and then the doors. Finally, she broke the eerie silence. “Is that woman really that bad? What was she, a high school

bully?"

Niko stopped, his eyes revealing a rage that his voice had only hinted at. "Some people you can talk to, some people you can manage, and some people are a destructive force of nature. Now that she knows I'm behind KnowMe, she's going to do everything she can do take us down."

"Why?" asked Sandra.

His eyes darted about as he debated his answer. "Just know when she comes for us, we cannot underestimate her."

Sandra nodded.

They walked to the office door in silence. Sandra stopped Niko from opening it. He frowned at her, "What?"

"The guys are going to pick up the mood you're in. Then they are going to realize that we're back without having had a funding meeting discussion. Then they are going to think we're out of money, which we pretty much are. And then—"

"Productivity is going to go in the toilet." Niko stroked his beard. "Suggestion?"

"Maybe we should go grab some burgers or something? We could talk some of this stuff out, before we tell the team. You and I both know that we really only have about two months of money left."

Niko stared at the floor, massaging the back of his



neck. He turned his attention back to her and nodded. "Okay, let's go. Have you ever been to Fillion's?"

"Never heard of it."

"It's up on Castle Avenue. Come on, it's a bit of a hike but worth it," said Niko, heading back to the elevator.

"Any ideas about getting new funding?"

"Well, given the social climate these days, we need a real investor to step up." Niko stared at the ceiling of the elevator as they stepped in.

Sandra nodded. "So how do we get one?"

He turned to her and said with a smirk, "We put a vid of us on TalkItNow."

"A vid of what?"

"Us giving the pitch of our lives and doing a NanoCloud demo with our final batch of nanobots. Hopefully it makes the rounds enough that it lands in front of our future investor."

"That's insane," replied Sandra with a laugh.

"Absolutely."

"I'm in," said Sandra.

THANK YOU
FOR READING THIS SAMPLE

The full book will be released on September 30th, 2016. If you'd like more information about the launch or availability, let me know.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

With a best-selling young adult series, *The Yellow Hoods*, well underway, a successful episodic series, *The Wizard Killer*, I decided it was time to share my deep love of science fiction with *The Man of Cloud 9*. It allowed me to pull from my over 20 years of experience in software, from leading teams at a Silicon Valley startup and working on huge projects at companies like Microsoft.

Like many people, I wrote and wrote but did practically nothing with it. Maybe I would be an author *some day*. Then two medical events, one after the other, made me change my priorities. With the amazing support of my wife and kids, I kicked off a serious indie author career, and the response has been amazing.

I live in Calgary, Alberta, Canada with my awesome wife, amazing kids, and lots and lots of sticky notes and notebooks.

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PLAYLIST

Want to know what I listened to while writing the book? It's at the end of the print and eBooks.