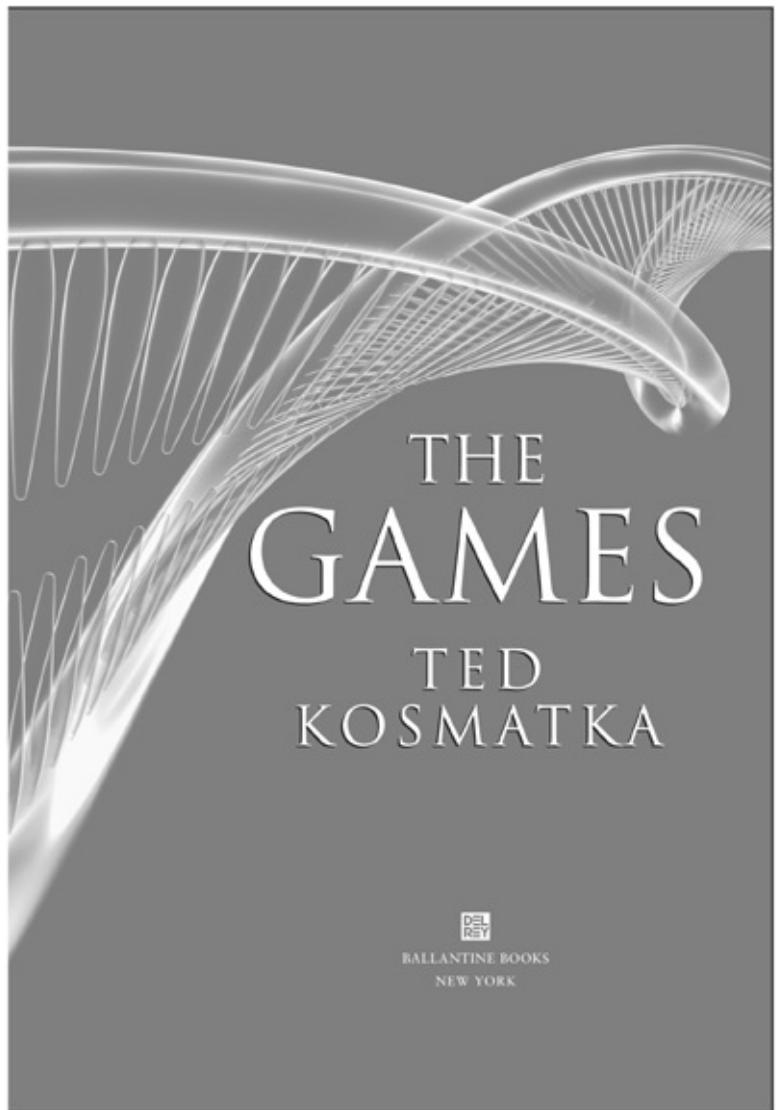


THE GAMES

TED
KOSMATKA



The Games is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

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About the Author

PROLOGUE

The boy lay motionless in the tube as the machine moved all around him. He held his breath and concentrated on the pinging, trying to clear his head like the white coats told him.

"Look into the screen, Evan," a voice said from a speaker near his ear.

Evan blinked against the sudden burst of white static and turned his head away.

They'd said this was going to be the last test, but they'd said that once before. They had lots of ways to test you here.

"What are you looking for, exactly?" Evan's mother asked from her spot near the door. She was backed against the wall, holding her purse tightly to her abdomen as if afraid to move farther into the room.

"Gross abnormalities," the man at the computer said. He didn't look up from his terminal as the machine continued its slow spin.

Evan glanced back at his mother. *They think I'm gross.*

There were four men in white coats in the room now, though only one was what his mother called a real doctor. The two younger men were testers from the special school, and the oldest man wore a dark tie under his white coat and probably wasn't any kind of doctor at all. That one scared Evan most of all.

The machine made a new noise, a clicking sound that Evan felt along the sides of his head. "What's it doing?" Evan asked, trying to sit up in the cramped tunnel.

The man with the tie stepped away from the computer and gently guided the boy onto his back again. "You must remain still. This is a big camera, and it's taking pictures of the inside of your head."

"I don't see a flash," Evan said.

"It uses magnets, not light."

"Can it tell what I'm thinking?"

"No," the man said.

But they'd said that before, too. Evan knew better; all these tests were to see what he was thinking. His mother told him so. Because of what he did to the game. Because of what happened to Mr. Jacobs.

Evan concentrated on being still. He didn't trust the man, didn't like the way his eyes tightened when he looked at the computer screen. *What did he see? How gross am I?* Evan closed his eyes.

"Mrs. Chandler—"

"Miss," she interrupted.

"Oh, sorry," the man at the computer said. He was the real doctor, and new to Evan's case. "Were there any complications with your pregnancy when you were carrying Evan?"

"No."

"Any family history of birth defects or deformity?"

"Nothing like that, no."

"Mental illness, learning disabilities?"

"Some of that, yeah."

“Who?”

“My brother.”

“What was his diagnosis?”

“I don’t know; he died when I was young. Why are you asking me all this? Did you find something?”

The man’s eyes lifted from the terminal to her face, then dropped again. It was the man with the tie who spoke: “Sub-cranial morphology can vary widely between normal individuals. There’s nothing to worry about.”

The machine clicked again. “You need to calm down, Evan,” the man at the computer said into the microphone. “Your activity is all over the place, and we need a baseline. You have to relax.”

“I’m trying,” Evan said.

“Think of something enjoyable.”

So Evan thought of his mother. He thought of times between his mother’s boyfriends, when he didn’t have to share her. He thought of times before the problems at school, before the new teacher Mr. Jacobs found out that he couldn’t count numbers right. Before Mr. Jacobs found out he couldn’t read.

“Good. Now look into the screen, Evan,” the man said.

Evan opened his eyes, and the static was gone, replaced by a blank screen. Then, on the screen, a number flashed.

“What do you see?” the man asked.

“I see a four,” Evan said.

“Good. What color is the number?”

“It’s white.”

“Good.”

More numbers flashed on the screen. Five, three, six, nine. Then letters appeared.

“What do you see now?” the man asked.

“Numbers and letters.”

“What colors are they?”

“They’re all white.”

“All of them?”

“Yes,” Evan said.

The screen faded to black. “You did good, Evan,” the man said. “Now we’re going to try something different.”

The black screen flashed and was suddenly full of spinning gears. The gears were of various sizes and colors, and they spread across the screen in an unbroken chain, each one touching one or two others and all of them moving in unison. The smallest gears moved quickest; the larger ones seemed barely to move at all.

“What do you see?” the man asked.

“I see gears.”

“What are they doing?”

“They’re turning.”

“Good, Evan.”

The gears stopped.

"If the top gear was turning toward the left," the man at the computer said, "which direction would the bottom gear be turning?"

"Up," Evan said immediately.

"Which is that, clockwise or counterclockwise?"

"Up," Evan repeated.

Evan's mother spoke: "He doesn't know about clocks, or left or right. I tried to teach him-I mean, we all tried to teach him...." Her voice trailed off.

The man stepped from his computer and bent to look into the tube at the boy. "If this gear was moving like this," he said, pointing and turning a circle with his finger, "then which direction would this gear way over here move?"

"Up," Evan said, pointing along the gear's outside edge, indicating a clockwise rotation.

The man smiled. "So it would."

The next series of images were more complex, but Evan's answers were just as immediate and just as correct. He didn't have to think about it.

"Let's try something different now," the man finally said.

It started easy enough. Strange new shapes appeared on the screen. They weren't gears exactly, but they had spikes and grooves and jutting angles that let them fit together the way gears do. The man bent near the tube again and showed him how by manipulating a control ball near his hand, Evan could change the images on the screen. He could move them.

"These are three-dimensional puzzles, Evan," the man said. "Your teachers tell us that you are very good at puzzles. Is that true?"

"I'm pretty good," Evan said, but he'd never seen puzzles like this before.

He experimented, moving one image toward another, turning it so their grooves lined up. The images merged, and a chime sounded.

"Good job, Evan," the man said, and walked back to his computer. "Now we'll try some harder ones."

New, complex shapes appeared on the screen. Evan had to rotate each one completely to get a good look, because all the sides were different. He moved them together. He found where they fit. The machine chimed.

"Good, Evan."

The solutions came easily. The complexity of the spatial configurations pulled him into focused him to a fine point of concentration. Something was happening in his head; he felt it as if some hidden green part of him was warming in the sunshine. The world around him retreated, became remote, irrelevant.

He no longer noticed the tube, or the computer, or the room with its four white walls and four white coats. There were only the puzzles, one after another, in a blur of shapes he manipulated with the controls at his fingertips.

He worked puzzle after puzzle, listening for the chime when he got them right.

Then the screen was empty, jarringly empty, all at once. It took him a moment to come back to himself enough to speak.

"More," he said.

"There are no more, Evan," the man said. "You've solved them all."

Evan glanced out of the tube, but the white coats weren't looking at him. They stared at their computer terminal.

The man with a tie was the first to look up from the glowing screen. He wore an expression Evan had never seen pointed at him before. Evan's stomach turned to ice.

HOSPITALS ALWAYS stank. There was something strange and sickly about the air in the building, and the breeze coming through the screen window hardly improved it. Evan could smell the garbage that lay heaped in the alley several floors below. Still, he moved closer to the window, pretending interest in the view because looking out the window was easier than looking at his mother. She sat at the big, glossy table. She was crying, though she did silently—one of the tricks she'd picked up during her time with her last boyfriend.

They'd been in this room for a while now, waiting.

When the door finally opened, Evan flinched. Three men walked in. He'd never seen any of them before, but their coats were dark, and all of them wore ties. It was bad. Men with ties always meant something bad. Evan's mother sat up quickly and wiped the corners of her eyes with a napkin she kept in her purse.

The men smiled at Evan and shook his mother's hand in turns, introducing themselves. The one who called himself Walden got right to the point. "Evan's tests were abnormal," he said.

He was a big man with a face like a square block, and he wore little wire glasses perched across his nose. Evan hadn't seen anyone with glasses like that in a long time; he tried not to stare.

"Where's the doctor?" Evan's mother asked.

"Evan's case has been transferred to me."

"But they told me Dr. Martin was going to be Evan's doctor. I thought that's why they brought him in."

"Dr. Martin himself felt that Evan's case required special attention that he could not provide."

"But I thought he was supposed to be a specialist."

"Oh, I assure you that he is. But we all feel Evan's case requires ... a more systematized process of inquiry."

Evan's mother stared at the man. "The teacher died, didn't he?"

"Tim Jacobs? No, he'll survive."

"Then I want to leave."

"Miss Chandler, we feel—"

"Right now, with my son, I want to leave."

"It's not as simple as that anymore." He pulled out a chair but didn't sit. Instead, he stepped his foot on the seat and leaned an arm casually across his extended knee. He towered over the sitting woman. "The man didn't die, but he's still having some motor coordination problems. We're not sure how your son managed to access the game's protocols the way he did. Those VR tutorials are hardwired and aren't meant to be altered from the inside."

"There must have been a glitch."

"There was no glitch. Your son did something. He changed something. A man almost died because of that."

"It was an accident."

"Was it?"

"Yes." His mother's voice was soft.

"I hear that teacher was hard on Evan. I hear he mocked him in front of other students."

His mother was silent.

"Miss Chandler, we're very concerned about Evan." The man who called himself Walden finally sank into the chair he'd been using as a footrest, and now his two silent companions pulled out chairs and sat. Walden laced his hands together in front of him on the table. "He's a special child with special needs."

He waited for Evan's mother to respond, and when she didn't, he continued. "We've tested many children here at these facilities in the last seven years. Many children. And we've never come across anyone with your son's particular mixture of gifts and disabilities."

"Gifts?" His mother's voice was harsh. "You call what happened a gift?"

"It could be. We need time to do more tests. Your son appears to have a very unusual form of synesthesia in addition to several other neurological abnormalities."

"Syna-what?"

"An abnormal cross-activation between brain regions. Often caused by structural malformations in the fusiform gyrus, but to be honest, in Evan's case, we're not sure. Some individuals conflate colors with shapes, or experience smells with certain sounds. But Evan's situation is more complex than that. His perception of numbers is somehow involved."

"But he doesn't understand numbers."

"He tested off the scale for numbers utility."

"He knows what numbers look like, and he can tell you the name of a number if you write it, but numbers don't mean anything to him."

"On some level, they do."

"He can't even tell you when one number is bigger than another. They're just words to him."

"Those spatial puzzles he solved were more than just puzzles. Some of them were also tricks. Some of them would have required complex calculus to solve correctly."

"Calculus? He can't count to twenty."

"Something in him can. Individuals with one form of synesthesia are often found to have another. We're not sure how Evan does what he does. And in that VR game, we're not even sure what it is that he did, let alone how. Evan needs special attention. He's going to need a special school."

"He's already in a special school," she said, but her voice was resigned.

"Yes, I've looked over his records. Miss Chandler, I have the authority to alter his public tracking. There is no reason why your boy should end up mopping floors somewhere."

"You can change his track? You can do that?"

The man nodded. "I have the authority."

"But why, after what happened?"

"Because we've never seen another boy like him. We're going to have to make up a new track. The Evan Chandler track. And to be honest, we're not really sure where it leads just yet."

EVAN'S MOTHER was hysterical the day they came for him. The sedatives quieted her as soft voiced men lowered her to the seedy couch. The boy's things were packed into a crate, and her drug-fuzzied mind found preoccupation in that for a moment.

Ten years old, and everything he owned fit into a single white box. It didn't seem possible but there it was, and two men in dark suits carried the box away between them.

She saw the faces of her neighbors in the open doorway, and she knew they assumed this was an arrest, or just another eviction. It was common. Their feral eyes shuffled through her possessions—the worn couch, her two plastic chairs, the small wooden coffee table with its wobbly leg—scouting for something to grab once the authorities were gone and her things were pushed out into the street.

"I don't see why he has to leave," she said. It was a plea.

"It is better for the boy this way," one of them, a blond woman, said. "We can better nurture his talents if we control the environment. You'll be able to visit as often as you like."

Evan's mother wiped the tears from her eyes and struggled unsteadily to her feet. There was no fighting it. A part of her had known that for a while now, since before what happened to Mr. Jacobs, even. Evan was different. It was always going to come to this; the world would take him, one way or the other.

"Can I see it?" she asked.

It was an hour's drive across the city. In the van, Evan's mother rocked him until the vehicle finally pulled to rest before a building surrounded by playgrounds. The group filed out. Children shouted and played in the distance while one boy stood gazing up at a flagpole. Evan's mother stared. That will be Evan, she knew. Strange even here. Odd among the odd.

She bent and kissed her son. "My special boy," she said, and squeezed him until a female agent tugged at the child's hand. Evan looked back and waved goodbye.

"I'll visit you soon, Evan," his mother called.

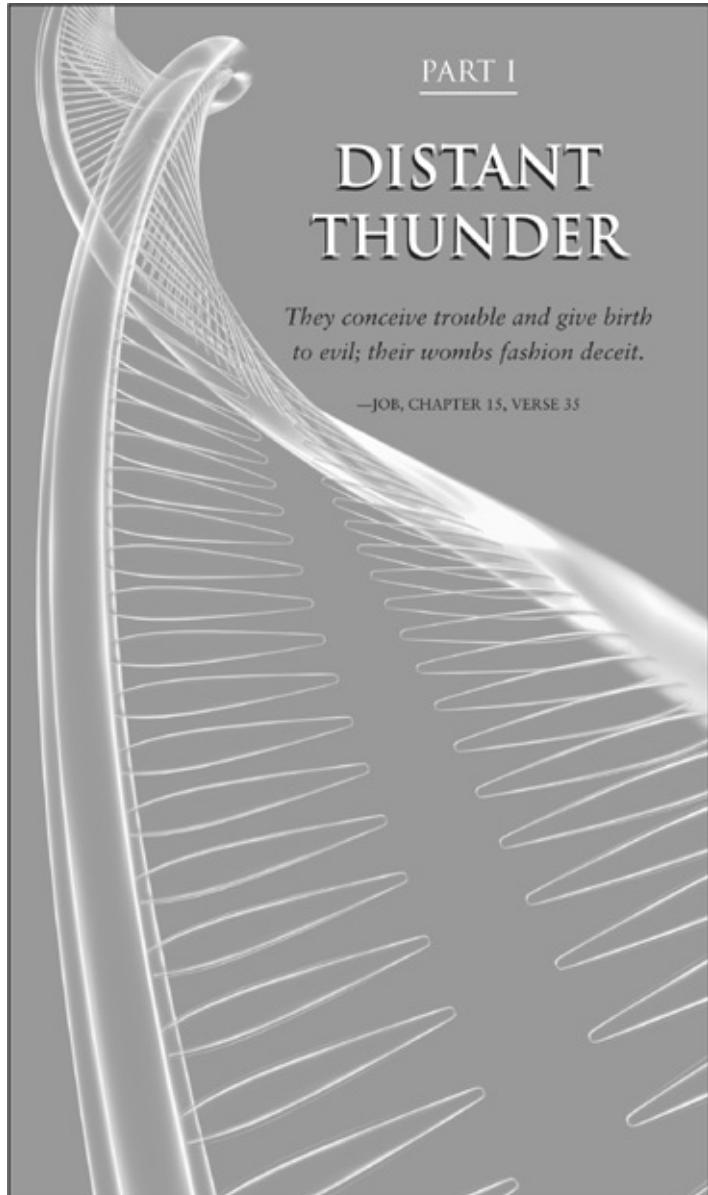
She watched her son disappear into the building and then broke down in sobs. She never saw him again.

PART I

DISTANT THUNDER

*They conceive trouble and give birth
to evil; their wombs fashion deceit.*

—JOB, CHAPTER 15, VERSE 35



CHAPTER ONE

Somewhere in the blackness a videophone rang. Through force of will, Silas brought the glowing face of the clock radio into focus: 3:07 A.M. His heart beat a little faster.

Is it ever good news at 3:07 A.M.?

He fumbled for the light near his bedside, sliding his hand up to the switch, wondering who could be calling this late. Suddenly, he knew—*the lab*. The light was nearly as blinding as the darkness, but by squinting he found the phone, being careful to hit the voice-only button.

“Hello,” he croaked.

“Dr. Williams?” The voice coming through the speaker was young and male. He didn’t recognize it.

“Yes,” Silas answered.

“Dr. Nelson had me call. You’ll want to come down to the compound.”

“What’s happened?” He sat up straighter in bed, swinging his feet to the carpet.

“The surrogate went into labor.”

“What? When?” It was still too soon. All the models had predicted a ten-month gestation.

“Two hours ago. The surrogate is in bad shape. They can’t delay it.”

Silas tried to clear his head, think rationally. “The medical team?”

“The surgeons are being assembled now.”

Silas ran his fingers slowly through his mop of salt-and-pepper curls. He checked the pile of dirty clothes lying on the floor next to his bed and snagged a shirt that looked a little less wrinkled than its brethren. Above all else, he considered himself to be an adaptable man.

“How long do I have?”

“Half-hour, maybe less.”

“Thanks, I’ll be there in twenty minutes.” Silas clicked the phone off. For better or for worse, it had begun.

THE NIGHT was cool for Southern California, and Silas drove with the windows down, enjoying the way the wind swirled around the cab of the Courser 617. The air was damp, tinged with the coming thunderstorm. Eagerness pressed him faster. He took the ramp to Highway 5 at seventy miles per hour, smiling at the way the car grabbed the curve. So many times as a youth he’d dreamed of owning a car such as this. Tonight his indulgence seemed prophetic; he needed every one of those Thoroughbreds galloping beneath the low, sleek hood.

As he merged onto the mostly empty interstate, he punched it, watching the speedometer climb to just over a hundred and five. The radio blared something he didn’t recognize—rhythmic and frenzied, almost primeval, it matched his mood perfectly. His anxiety built with his proximity to the lab.

Over the years he had become accustomed to the occasional midnight dash to the lab, but had never been like this, with so many unknowns. A vision of Evan Chandler’s grossly jowled face entered his mind, and he felt a rush of anger. He couldn’t really blame Chandler. You

couldn't ask a snake not to be a snake. It was the members of the Olympic Commission who should have known better.

He switched lanes to avoid a mini-tram, his speed never dropping below ninety-five miles per hour. His dark eyes glanced into the rearview, scouting for a patrol. The ticket itself wouldn't bother him. He was exempt from any fine levied by local authorities while on his way to and from the lab, but the time it would cost to explain himself would be the real expense. *All clear.* He pushed the gas pedal to the floor. Minutes later, he hit his brakes, downshifted to third, and cut across two lanes to catch his exit. He was now out of the city proper and into the suburbs of San Bernardino.

Silas passed the brightly lit main entrance of Five Rings Laboratories without taking his foot off the gas. He didn't have time for the main entrance, the winding drive. Instead, he veered left at the access road, whipping past the chain-link fence that crowded the gravel. At the corner, he spun the wheel and hooked another left, decelerating as he neared the reception gate. He flashed his badge to the armed guard, and the iron bars swung inward just in time to save his paint job.

The lab grounds were vast and parklike—a sprawling technological food web of small interconnected campuses, three- and four-story structures sharing space with stands of oak growth. Glass and brick and trees. A semicircle of buildings crouched in conference around a small man-made pond.

He followed his headlights to a building at the west end of the complex and skidded to stop in his assigned parking spot.

He was surprised to see Dr. Nelson standing there to greet him—a short, squat form cast in fluorescent lighting. "You were right. Twenty minutes exactly," Dr. Nelson said.

Silas groaned as he extricated himself from the vehicle. "One of the advantages of owning a sports car," he said, and stretched his stiff back as he got to his feet.

A nervous smile crept to the corner of Nelson's mouth. "Yeah, well, I can see the disadvantage. Someone your size should really consider a bigger car."

"You sound like my chiropractor." Silas knew things weren't going well upstairs; Nelson wasn't one for quips. In fact, Silas couldn't recall ever seeing the man smile. His stomach tightened a notch.

They made their way to the elevators, and Nelson pushed the button for the third floor.

"So where do things stand?" Silas asked.

"It's anesthetized, and the surgical team should be ready any minute."

"The vitals?"

"Not good. The old girl is worn out, just skin and bones. Even the caloric load we've been pushing hasn't been enough. The fetus is doing okay, though. Still has a good, strong heartbeat. The sonogram shows it's roughly the size of a full-term calf, so I don't think there should be anything tricky about the surgery."

"The surgery isn't what I'm worried about."

"Yeah, I know. We're ready with an incubator just in case."

Silas followed Nelson around a corner and down another long hallway. They stopped at a glass door, and Nelson slid his identification card into the console slot. There were a series of beeps, then a digitized, feminine voice: "Clearance accepted; you may enter."

The view room was long, narrow, and crowded. It was an enclosed balcony that overhung

a surgical suite, and most of the people were gazing into the chamber below through a row of windows that ran along the left wall.

At the far end of the packed room, a tall man with a shaggy mane of blond hair noticed them. "Come in, come in," Benjamin said with a wave. At twenty-six, he was the youngest man working on the project. A prodigy funneled from the eastern cytology schools, he described himself as a man who knew his way around an oocyte. Silas had taken an instant liking to him when they'd met more than a year ago.

"You're just in time for the fun," Benjamin said. "I thought for sure they wouldn't be able to drag you out of bed."

"Three hours' sleep is all any man needs in a thirty-six-hour period." He grabbed Benjamin's outstretched hand and gave it a firm shake. "What's the status of our little friend?"

"As you can see"—Benjamin gestured toward the window—"things have progressed a little faster than we expected. The surrogate turned the corner from distressed to dying in the last hour, and it's triggered contractions. As far as we can tell, it may still be a little early, but since you can't sail a sinking ship"—Benjamin pulled a cigar from the inside pocket of his lab coat and held it out to Silas—"it looks like our little gladiator is going to have a birthday."

Silas took the cigar, smiling against his best efforts. "Thanks." He turned and stepped toward the glass. The cow was on its side on a large stainless-steel table, surrounded by a team of doctors and nurses. The surgeons huddled around their patient, only their eyes and foreheads visible above sterile masks.

"It should be anytime now," Benjamin said.

Silas turned to face him. "Anything new on the sonogram visuals?"

Benjamin shook his head and pushed his glasses up his long, thin nose. For the first time his face lost its optimistic glow. "We did another series, but we haven't been able to glean any additional information."

"And those structures we talked about?"

"Still can't identify them. Not that people haven't had a field day coming up with ideas."

"I hate going into this blind."

"Believe me, I know." Benjamin's voice soured. "But the Olympic Commission didn't exactly leave you with a lot of room for maneuvering, did they? The fat bastard isn't even a biologist, for Christ's sake. If things go wrong, it won't be on your head."

"You really believe that?"

"No, I guess I don't."

"Then you're wise beyond your years."

"Still, one way or the other, Evan Chandler is going to have a lot of explaining to do."

"I don't think he's that worried," Silas said softly. "I don't see him here, do you?"

THE SCIENTISTS stood crowded against the glass, transfixed by the scene unfolding beneath them. Inside the white stricture of lights, a scalpel blinked stainless steel. The cow lay motionless on its left side as it was opened from sternum to pelvis in one slow, smooth cut. Gloved hands insinuated themselves into its abdomen, gently separating layers of tissue, reaching deep. Silas felt his heart thumping in his chest. The hands disappeared entirely, then the arms came up to the elbows. Assistants used huge curved tongs to stretch the incision wide.

The surgeon shifted his weight. His shoulder strained. Silas imagined the man's teeth gritting with effort beneath the micropore mask as he rummaged around in the bovine innards. *What did he feel?* A final pull and it was over. The white-smocked physician slowly pulled a dark, dripping mass away as a nurse moved in to cut the umbilical cord. Faintly, sporadic beeping in the background changed to a steady tone as the cow flatlined. The medical team ignored it, moving to focus their energies on the newborn.

The first surgeon put the bloody shape on the table under the lamps and began wiping down with a sponge and warm water, while another doctor peeled away the dense layers of fibrous glop that still clung to it.

The surgeon's voice sounded over the speakers in the view room from a microphone in his mask. "The fetus is dark ... still covered by the embryonic sack ... thick, fibrous texture; I'm tearing it away."

Silas's face was nearly pushed against the glass, trying to get a better look over the doctor's shoulder. For a moment he caught a glimpse of the newborn, but then the medical team shifted around their patient and he could see nothing. The sound of the doctor's breathing filled the view room.

"This ... interesting ... I'm not sure ..." The doctor's voice trailed off in the speakers.

Suddenly, a shrill cry split Silas's ears, silencing the excited background chatter. The cry was strange, like nothing he'd ever heard before.

The doctors stepped back from the wailing newborn one by one, opening a gap, allowing Silas his first real glimpse.

His mouth dropped open.

LATER THAT morning, the storm that had been threatening for hours finally moved in with all the subtlety of a shotgun blast. Thunder boomed across the expansive field of California模索. Dr. Silas Williams watched from behind the window of his second-story office, hands folded behind his back, drinking in the scene. The familiar ache in his bad ear had finally begun to ebb, becoming tolerable again. It always seemed to act up at the most inopportune times, and he hadn't let himself take anything stronger than aspirin because of what he knew was coming. He'd need his edge today.

Outside his window, the few well-manicured windbreaks of oak, hickory, and alder that stood scattered across the vast green promenade seemed to sway and shake with anticipation. Their branches bowed in the gusts that swept in from the west. In the distance, he could see the road and the cars—their headlight beams turned on against the darkening mid-morning sky.

He'd always felt there was magic in these moments just before the rain, when the sky brooded and rumbled its promises. The last few moments before a hard rain seemed to exist outside of time. It was the eternal drama, old as nature. Old as life. A dull curtain of precipitation spread west to east across the landscape, instantly soaking the grass. For a moment, he clutched at the wispy borders of ancient half-memories of other storms on other continents, of tall savanna grass waving and genuflecting before the monsoon.

The first fat drop spattered the window. Then another, and a dozen, and the window ran like a river, smearing away the outside world. As the sky darkened further, and the scene beyond the window lost its form in the streaming rain, his reflection materialized in the glass.

before him. He considered the visage gazing intently back at him. A good enough face, if little weatherworn. For the first time in a long time, on this day of birth and rain, his mind cast back to his childhood. To a face so like his own.

Silas remembered his father in flashes—long legs, a towering silhouette that tucked him in at night. Huge hands with long, rectangular palms. Masculine. Solidly there.

Then not.

Silas's father was killed in a refinery fire when he was three, leaving behind only the faintest ghosts of memories for his son. Most of what Silas knew of his father came from his mother's stories and pictures. But in many ways, it was the pictures that spoke more eloquently.

The family portrait that hung in his mother's living room for decades showed a huge broad-shouldered man with tight curls shorn low to the scalp. A gentle half-smile dimpled his left cheek. He was sitting next to Silas's mother, holding hands, his dark brown complexion contrasting sharply against the warm New Orleans honey of her skin. He had the kind of face that some Americans would have described as exotic—both broad and angular, an unexpected bone structure that snagged the eye. Immense cheekbones, high and sharp, dominated the proportions of his face. Many times growing up, Silas had noticed people lingering in front of that picture, as though his father was a puzzle to figure out. What did they see in that dead man?

While in her twenties, Silas's sister had leveraged their father's bone structure and long limbs into a modeling career. It had paid for college when she chose to go against the tracking of her state sponsorship. A thing most young people couldn't afford to do. Ashley was married now, and had a young son. She still had a year left on her primary nuptial contract, but they were a happy couple and already had plans to re-up lifelong at the firm option. He envied them a little. What they had was so different from what he'd shared with Chloe all those years ago.

He remembered the arguments and the shouting, the slammed doors, the things said that couldn't be taken back. But it was the silences that did the most damage. The interminable quiet that ate their evenings, growing longer over every passing month as they each came to terms with the fact that there was nothing really left to say.

Neither of them had wanted children, and eventually there had been nothing there to hold them together. Their careers became their partners. In the end, they had simply let the contract expire. They didn't even talk about it. The third anniversary came and went without either of them filing for a continuance, and the next day, they just weren't married anymore. A lot of marriages ended like that.

Still, on the evening she'd moved out, he'd felt crazy. He hadn't wanted her to stay, but as he stood there, watching her walk through the door for what would be the last time, he felt ... grief. Not for the loss of her but for the loss of what there should have been between them. The enormous emptiness of his life had almost overwhelmed him.

As always, his work had been his savior. Later that month, he won the Crick Award for his contribution to design in the *Ursus theodorus* project. He was only twenty-seven years old and suddenly found himself center stage in the biological revolution. The bear teddy had eventually become the fourth most popular pet in the United States, next in line after dogs, cats, and domestic foxes. That had been the start of it all.

A buzz on the intercom interrupted his thoughts.

Lightning flashed. Silas took a deep breath and watched sheets of rain cascade down the glass. He wasn't looking forward to this. There was a mutual dislike between him and most of the members of the Olympic Commission, and this year things had come to a head over the decision to use Chandler's design.

The buzz came again.

"Yes," he said.

"Dr. Williams, Mr. Baskov is here to see you," his secretary said.

Silas was surprised. "Send him in." It was hardly an industry secret that Stephen Baskov represented more than just another faceless vote in the commission. His reputation was widely acknowledged and served him well in the shark-infested waters of the Olympic politico. Officially, he merely chaired the commission. Unofficially, he ruled.

"Hello and good morning, Dr. Williams," Stephen Baskov said, switching his cane to his left hand and holding out his right.

Silas shook it, then gestured toward a chair. Baskov sank into the seat graciously, letting his feet stretch out in front of him. He was a broad man, with even, ruddy features. He wore his snow-white locks combed in such a way as to get the most economy from a diminished budget of hair. He looked to be about eighty years old, an affable old man—grandfatherly almost—but Silas knew better. His simple appearance was in stark contrast to the reality of the man. Within his worn face, beneath his bushy white eyebrows, shone eyes like hard glacial ice.

"I hear you had quite an exciting time last night," Baskov began.

Silas eased back in his seat and propped his feet up on the big desk. "Yes, it was an eye-opener."

Baskov smiled, resting one grizzled hand on each knee. "My people tell me you're responsible for the successful birth of another gladiator. Congratulations."

"Thank you. I assume that's not all you heard."

"Why do you assume I heard something more?"

"Because if that was all your people told you, then you wouldn't be here right now."

"No, probably not."

"Then what did bring you here? What can I do for you today?"

"The commission decided not to wait for your report. I've been sent to find out just what exactly we're dealing with here. To be honest with you, the description we've been given is little disconcerting."

"Disconcerting? An interesting choice of words."

"Oh, there were more words used than just that."

"Such as?"

"Inexplicable," Baskov said. "Disquieting. Disturbing."

Silas nodded. "I'd say those fit pretty well."

"None of those are words the commission likes to hear in association with its investment in this project."

"Nor would I."

"Is it healthy?"

"Vigorously," Silas said.

"That's a good sign."

"For now."

"Do you foresee any problems, any reason why it may not be able to compete?"

"All I do see are problems. As to whether or not it can compete, I have no idea. We're going to have to get the blood results back before we can even speculate if it's going to survive the week."

"Why is that?"

"I can't even begin to guess what sort of immunity haplotype it might have. A common cold might kill it."

"A common cold? That's rather unlikely, isn't it?"

"Sir, I have no way of knowing whether it's likely or not."

"You've never had a problem with disease susceptibility before."

"Exactly. I've also never had a problem accessing the template protocols." Silas let challenge slip through the cracks of his expression.

Baskov noticed it in an instant and turned the tables. "I sense a climate of animosity here," he said, as a smile spread across the lower portion of his face. His voice rose a subtle questioning octave. "Do you have a problem with me, Dr. Williams?"

The directness of the question took Silas aback. He toyed with the idea of meeting it head-on, but then decided to change tacks slightly. His job as program head was nearly as much a political appointment as it was a scientific one, and although he hated that aspect of the job, he'd learned a few things about diplomacy during his years in the position. Meeting something like the commission head-on was a good way to get a broken head.

"Let me ask you a question, Mr. Baskov," Silas said. "I've overseen the Helix arm of Olympic Development for twelve years. In that time, how many gold medals has the United States brought home in the gladiator competition?"

"Three," Baskov said. His brows furrowed. He wasn't a man used to answering questions.

"Three; that's right. Three games, three wins. They were my *designs* that brought home those medals. Designs, not just the cytological grunt work. Your commission fought against me this time. I want to know why." That question had burned in his gut for all the months he'd watched the surrogate's distended belly grow.

Baskov sighed. "This event is different from the others; I shouldn't have to tell you that. There are factors involved that you aren't aware of."

"Make me aware, then."

"Most of the other Olympic events haven't changed much in the last hundred years. The marathon is still twenty-six miles, and will still be twenty-six miles when you and I are long dead. But the gladiator event is *about* change."

"I thought it was about winning."

"That above all. But it's about showcasing a country's technological advancement. We have to use the newest, best tools at our disposal. It's not like the hundred-yard dash, where you take the fastest guy you happen to have, push him onto the track, and hope for the best."

"I doubt Olympic running coaches would appreciate that oversimplification."

"I doubt I give a damn what they would or wouldn't appreciate. The gladiator event is more than a test of simple foot speed."

"And it's more than some VR sim," Silas snapped back.

"Yes, it is. But that doesn't change the fact that Chandler's computer is capable of design specs that you can't touch. There's only one rule in this event: no human DNA. That's it. This leaves a hell of a lot of room to play, and we weren't taking advantage of it. Ours was a business decision, nothing more. Nothing less. It wasn't meant as a reflection on you."

"If it were a reflection on me, then I could understand it. But my designs have a history of success to back them up. We won. We've always won."

"And the endorsements that go with it, I know. The commission is very thankful for that. You're a huge part of why the United States has dominated the field. But it could have gone either way last time. You know that."

Silas remained silent. He remembered the blood. He remembered the swing of guts in the sawdust. The U.S. gladiator had outlived its competitor by forty-seven seconds. The difference between gold and silver.

"I'm not sure that you fully appreciate the pressure that the program is under right now," Baskov said. "We can't afford to lose. While you've spent all your time sequestered away in your personal little laboratory retreat here, the rest of the program has had to exist in the real world. Or have you forgotten?"

"No."

"I think you have. The gladiator event is a bloody business—that's why it's so popular and why it's always under attack. The activists have a powerful lobby in Congress this time around, and they're pushing for a new vote."

"And they won't get it."

"No, they won't. Not this time. But public opinion is an unpredictable thing. Success has buoyed it up till now, and the commission was informed that we must continue to be successful if the gladiator event is to remain part of the Olympics. We do not have any other option."

Informed by whom? Silas wondered.

"This competition is not going to be as simple and straightforward as the last," Baskov continued. "Our sources tell us that China's contestant will be very formidable. Let's just say that when we compared your designs to what we know we'll be up against, your ideas came up lacking. You couldn't have won with the codes you had in the scrollers."

"How could you know—"

"You couldn't have won," Baskov interrupted. "Our decision wasn't made lightly."

Silas's face drained of expression as he considered the man sitting before him. He wanted to grab him by the lapels, pull him off his feet, and shake him. He wanted to yell in his face. *What have you done?*

But he thought again of broken heads, and by slow degrees managed to put his anger in place he could shut down. In controlled, clipped words, he said, "I understand. Perhaps we don't have all the information, but I'm still program head. We still have problems that need to be dealt with."

"I've heard. We've been aware of the problems. Your reports during the last several months didn't fall on deaf ears."

"Then why hasn't the commission acted?"

"We just decided to wait and see what happened."

"Would you like to see ... what's happened?"

"I was waiting for you to ask."

THEY SHUFFLED slowly down the narrow corridor, with Silas consciously shortening his strides to accommodate Baskov's hobbling gait. He wondered at the anticipation the older man must be feeling. Hell, he was feeling it, too, and he'd already seen the organism, inspected it, held it. The newborn was the most beautifully perfect thing Silas had ever seen.

Baskov broke the silence between them as they turned a corner. "The commission is very troubled by the description we received. It isn't really humanoid, is it?"

"Maybe. Not really."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"When you see it, you'll understand."

"And what about the hands?"

"What about them?"

"Does it really have ... well, hands? I mean ... it doesn't have paws or hooves or something like the others?"

Silas suppressed the urge to laugh. *Let the cocky old son of a bitch sweat a little.* "I'd have to call them hands. They aren't like ours, but they're hands." His bitter humor abated somewhat. "The similarities are mostly superficial, though."

"Are you going to have trouble proving no human DNA was used in the design?"

Silas looked down at the old man. For a moment, he felt his temper rise again. He took a deep breath. With the competition less than a year away, it was a little late to be asking this question now. "Your guess is as good as mine at this point," he said. "Chandler's masterpiece didn't provide us with any sort of explanation for the data in the scrollers, just raw code. I assumed that since you chose his design over mine, you would have some sort of idea where you were getting. You need to ask him. My reports are accurate, and if you read them, you —"

"We read them; we just weren't sure if we could believe them."

Silas mulled over several responses to the older man's statement, but since most of them involved the end of his career and quite possibly his incarceration for battery, he decided to say nothing at all. For the first time, he considered the possibility that the head of the Olympic Commission might be utterly irrational in some aspects of his thinking. Power does that to men sometimes.

They stepped through a set of steel doors and followed the narrow hall around the corner. "I want to remind you that the sponsor dinner is still on for tomorrow night. I need you to be there," Baskov said.

"I'll send Dr. Nelson."

"You'll be there in person. We need to quell the rumors that have already begun to fly. Image is money in this business. The delegation will leave from the complex at six o'clock."

Rumors?

They came to a second set of steel doors. A large yellow sign read:

**ATTENTION
BADGED PERSONNEL ONLY
BEYOND THIS POINT**

Silas carded them through, and Baskov stopped short, blinking against the white brightness of the nursery. A stout, flame-haired man sat against a console near the far wall. There were no windows, but a large glass chamber boxed in the center of the room.

"How's it doing?" Silas asked the redhead.

"Just fine," Keith answered. "Been sleeping like a baby for an hour now. Come to show off your little creation?"

"Not mine," Silas said. "This is Chandler's handiwork."

They peered in. The crib was large, and behind the chromed bars, a loosely swaddled shape twisted and bobbed within a cocoon of pink blankets.

"Looks like it's awake now," Silas said.

"Probably hungry again," Keith replied. "You wouldn't believe how much it loves to eat."

Silas checked the paper printout of the infant's eating habits, then turned back to Baskov. "The chamber is a walk-in incubator. The system has autonomic control of everything from temperature to humidity to oxygen-sat levels."

Baskov nodded, shifting his weight for a clearer view.

"Want to get a closer look?" Silas asked.

"Of course."

They donned sterile masks and gowns, and stretched latex gloves over their hands. "Just temporary precaution," Silas said.

"For us, or it?"

"It."

Baskov nodded. "Why are we calling it an 'it,' anyway? It's male, right?"

"No, female by the external genitalia. Or lack thereof."

With a soft hiss, the door to the inner chamber opened and they stepped through. The air was warmer, wetter. Silas could feel the heat of the lights on the bridge of his nose above the mask. He bent and reached his hands through the bars and into the crib. Baskov hovered just to his side. The covers peeled back from the writhing form.

Silas heard a sudden intake of air near his shoulder.

"My God" was all Baskov could manage.

The newborn was on its back, four stocky limbs pedaling the air. Once again, Silas struggled to wrap his mind around what he was seeing. There was nothing to compare it to, so his brain had to work from scratch, filling in all the pieces, seeing everything at once.

The newborn was hairless, and most of its skin was a deep, obsidian black, slightly reflective in the warm glare of the heat lamps, as though covered with a shiny coat of gloss. Only its hands and forearms were different. It was roughly the size of a three-year-old human toddler. Wide shoulders tapered into long, thick arms that now bunched and stretched toward the bars. Below the elbow, the skin color shifted to deep red. Its blood-colored hands clenched in the air, the needle tips of talons just beginning to erupt from the ends of the long, hooked fingers. The rear legs were raptor monstrosities, jointed in some complicated way, with splayed feet that corded with muscle and sinew just below the surface of its skin.

Two enormous gray eyes shone out of the brilliant blackness of its face and raked across the two men looking down. Silas could almost feel the weight of the alien gaze. The lower jaw was enormously wide and jutting, built for power. A grossly bossed cranial vault spread wide over the pulled-out face, capped by two soft semicircular flaps of ear cartilage.

It opened its mouth, mewling the same strange cry that Silas had heard the night before. Even the inside of its mouth was midnight black.

"This is beyond ..." Baskov began.

"Yes, that's a perfect way to describe it."

Baskov began to reach a gloved hand toward the newborn but then apparently thought better of it. "This is beyond the reach of what I thought we were able to do," he finished.

"It is. We cannot do this," Silas said.

The two men locked eyes.

"How?" Baskov asked.

"You're asking the wrong guy, remember? I'm the builder, not the designer."

"Does it seem to be put together well? Are those legs supposed to look like that?"

"Well, everything is symmetrical on the exterior, so that's a good sign. But you haven't seen the really interesting thing yet." Silas leaned through the bars and grabbed the newborn under the upper arms. It struggled, but he was able to flip it over onto its stomach.

"What are those?" Baskov whispered.

"We're not totally sure, but the X-ray data indicate they're probably immature wing structures of some sort."

"Wings? Are you telling me this thing has wings?"

Silas shrugged his answer.

"They're not functional, are they?"

"I don't see how they could be. Flight is probably the single most difficult form of locomotion from a design standpoint, and this thing certainly doesn't look like it was built along avian lines. The bones are huge, strong."

"But why even try? There isn't really room to fly in the arena." Baskov bent closer. "And those big ears are a liability. The eyes, too."

"Now you understand my frustration with your chosen designer. We need to talk to him."

Baskov's expression faded from wonder to irritation. "Chandler isn't as easy to reach as he used to be."

"Where is he?"

"Where isn't the problem. He just isn't easy to reach anymore."

AFTER WALKING Baskov back to the lobby, Silas returned to the nursery and sent Keith home for the night. He stood alone at the side of the crib, silently watching the baby breathe. It was a baby. Big as a newborn calf but just as underdeveloped and fragile as any human newborn. He extended a hand through the bars and stroked the infant's back. It lay on its tummy, legs drawn up, bottom stuck in the air.

It's beautiful.

But then, almost all life is beautiful at this stage. Pure innocence combined with complete selfishness. Its only function was to take from those around it so that it could live and grow while remaining completely unaware of the effort involved in meeting its needs.

Silas closed his eyes and breathed in the smell of the creature. He felt himself relax a little. His sister hinted once that she thought he'd become a geneticist to create something that would be a part of him. She was wrong. That was why people have children.

He wanted to create something better than himself. Better than any man could be.

Something a little closer to perfect. But he had always failed. His creations were monsters compared to this. They were just animal Frankensteins that acted out impulses societies wouldn't allow men to indulge in.

But he'd come close once. Teddy. *Ursus theodorus* had been loving, gentle, and even intelligent, after a fashion. That last quality had cost the first prototype its life. It had been too intelligent. Some people got nervous. The board of directors had had its say, and late one evening, he'd been forced to place the little creature on a table and inject it with enough animal tranquilizer to stop its breathing. He'd stood back with ice in his gut while his creation died.

The next series of Teddys were dumber and better suited the board, but it wasn't the same for Silas. He'd lost his stomach for pet manufacture. When the position at the Olympic Commission became available, he'd jumped at it. If he was going to watch his successes die, he would know to expect it from the outset. No more surprises.

But this was a surprise.

But not my surprise. Not my baby this time.

Chandler was deranged. There was no doubting that. And this was his creation. Silas fought back a surge of begrudging admiration for the man. In all Silas's years as a geneticist, he had never even come close to developing a creature like the one that lay before him now.

He shoved the feelings to the side, letting the anger take its place. Chandler knew nothing about genetics. He knew nothing about life. All he knew was computers. And his computer had been the true creator, after all.

This perfect little life form that lay snoring on the other side of the bars had been created by an organized composite of wires, chips, and screens. Somehow, all this beauty, all this perfection, had come from a machine.

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