

The world outside was dark and scary. Violent bloody revolts clashed with enforcers loyal to the United States. While growing factions formed, fueled by those who possessed telekinetic powers. The sacred president, Henry Scott, fought back with his enhanced soldiers. Many thought of him as a leader with a direct connection to God and therefore his actions could do no wrong. This same narrative occurred across every continent and pushed the world into a global recession. This placed the civilian class under enormous pressure and many felt compelled to commit crimes, join the military, or lose their livelihoods.

Rampant crime and government instability made the common man fearful and open to the consolidation of federal power.

Henry Scott campaigned on those feelings and said, "I cannot keep the American people safe if I'm constrained by the corrupt, old, and slow members of Congress. God will be my check and with him, we will restore balance to this great nation!"

With total control as America's first emperor, Henry imposed martial law and merged the military and political classes. He then rewarded the people most loyal to him with enhanced abilities and unbounded wealth. At all levels of government, bribery became necessary for basic functions, and the population saw extortion as the cost of doing business.

Not all these changes were popular, and Henry was obsessed with creating a dynasty. To do that, he had to uphold the image of an unshakable force that could lead America to victory against radical separatists and foreign agents.

The major initiative he championed was, "America is more than the people who do the work or the assets we own. Our founders built us on a collection of ideals. As long as we still remember, those, the American spirit, will live on. To guarantee that our future generations will be reminded, we've sent artifacts into space on a 100-year orbit. Those include the first American flag and the document signed by Grant and Lee to mark the end of the Civil War. And just so we remember that we are a nation founded on Christian ideals, we will adorn the spacecraft with the message, In God We Trust."

Scientists around the world were mobilized to build out this vision formally named The American Dream. Much further down the political pecking order at the National Institute of Standards and Technology in Gaithersburg, MD, scientists were tasked with collaborating with another research facility to

improve timekeeping in space. The lead scientist managed the specific details of the work while the majority continued to probe for answers to their basic science questions and maintain the existing facilities.

Richard's old eyes peered at the sterile, high-tech laboratory with crisp white walls and bright fluorescent lights. A series of large, glass-fronted cabinets lined one end, each housing a different type of atomic clock. The hum of machinery and electronic beeps were the only sounds in the room. At the center stood an extended workbench with various instruments and tools neatly arranged on its surface. A bank of computer screens flickered with data and graphs, monitoring the performance of the clocks.

The double doors at one end of the room led to a temperature-controlled chamber with the most sensitive equipment. A skinny, auburn-haired lad, Alex switched between his nose pressed upon a thick manual and adjusting the settings on a hydrogen maser, his concentration absolute as he fine-tuned the frequency. He worked in isolation, preferring silent, uninterrupted focus while jotting notes in his tiny black notebook.

When questioned about his anti-social tendencies, he said, "Colleagues aren't family; any inkling, to the contrary, is corporate propaganda. I'll put my full effort into my work, but I'm not disillusioned that this is anything other than a financial transaction for my services."

Along another wall, a group of apprentices gathered around a cesium atomic clock, discussing their latest test results. Jim was a stout fellow with a friendly smile, round belly, and swooped brown hair who stood in front wearing a white lab coat slightly too small, with sleeves a couple of inches below the wrists. He held a small screwdriver in his thick hands, which he used to adjust a dial on the front of the clock precisely. The younger students stood in a semi-circle around him, their eyes wide with wonder as they watched the maintenance procedure. He worked methodically, his movements slow and steady as he replaced the cesium.

In a low, patient voice, he commented, "NIST-F1, aka the fountain clock, since the cesium atoms move like a fountain. These atoms start in a vacuum chamber with lasers molding them into a cluster at near absolute zero temperature. We then use another set of lasers to induce its signature upward arc within

a microwave cavity. When the ball drops like it's New Year, it changes state. The microwave frequency that yields the most cesium atoms to follow this pattern becomes the basis for the second."

Jim finished adjusting the clock settings on a nearby computer, tweaking the clock's frequency to ensure that it maintained precise time. He stepped back and said, "That should be it. We just need to run a few tests to ensure everything works."

He smiled in satisfaction while he watched his students' eyes widen in amazement.

Contrarily, Nathan stood clean-shaven, muscular, and determined to make a good impression on his superiors. Years of living in the home of a drill instructor trained him to uphold the rule of law and proper conduct. He'd be the enforcer, taking his leadership responsibilities seriously to stem an epidemic of "brain rot" and corruption the outside world inflicted on this new generation. He'd lead by example, fervently sculpting his body and broadening his knowledge of science and Christianity. The demeanor he maintained made him a daunting figure to contest. Most accepted his will while burying any thoughts or critique to backroom conversations far from his hawkish eyes. Even Jim, concerned with his underlings' emotions, didn't dare confront Nathan publicly. The standard procedure required Nathan to respond to any perceived slight to his pride with greater and more aggressive force. The only two things he respected were age and title. Luckily, Jim was Richard's eldest assistant, followed by Nathan, then Alex.

To Nathan's disdain, a wiry eccentric protege garnered Richard's attention. Typically, Andrew would be with the rest, but given his expansive knowledge and creativity, Richard had given him a particular free range to experiment. His peers called him Drew, his hair red-orange raised in every direction as if recently shocked by electricity. An oversized lab coat like the younger students, but haphazardly ripped into short-sleeved pants and shirt. Andrew arranged sensors and wires in stacks at the workbench. A breadboard that looked like Medusa's hair with multi-color wire, alligator clips, and electrical tape was being swapped out and rearranged enough for Richard to draw parallels to the ship of Theseus. If Andrew lived in Naples, Italy, in 1818, it was conceivable he'd spawn a creation to rival Frankenstein, given his inclination to combine machines and ideas out of pure scientific curiosity.

A misguided experiment wasn't a failure, just exciting data to fuel future arrangements. Richard approached Andrew before Nathan could and said, "Looks like you're progressing. I suggest keeping a tidy space and putting everything back in the correct place this time."

To Richard's continued discomfort, Andrew hugged him and said, "Tons of insights! I'm still playing around with different atoms, their number, and their configuration within a three-dimensional lattice structure. Strontium is looking very promising, Dad."

Richard cringed and said, "I'm not your father, and to suggest otherwise is unprofessional."

Andrew said, "The other kids call you dad. Why can't I? You're my work, Dad."

Richard spoke firmly, "When they say it, it's accidental. When you do it, it's on purpose!"

Richard smiled and said, "Don't make me put you back into Nathan's class. He'll have you doing pushups again."

Andrew laughed, "Those were easy peasy lemon squeezy. Check out my guns. Unfortunately, I'm making too much progress with my newfound freedom. I'll try to behave, master."

When Andrew said the last word, he bowed with his hands clasped.

Richard shook his head, then dispersed alongside people fresh from Jim's lesson. When he walked, he thought about how he'd continue to motivate his students to learn and work in these trying times. To Richard, disillusionment was a hallmark of humanity. Research consumed his identity, constantly pulling him to do more. He wondered, *Am I caught in a routine? Are my tasks needless? Should I make a change? Am I becoming stagnant?*

As he aged, his role required more coordination and delegation rather than physically interacting with the timepieces. The slow disconnection from his professional identity permeated him with dread till he acted upon the advice from his mentor, Mr. Parker, who said, "I've only survived long in this profession by creating sparks of joy through intellectual and creative freedom. Your work is important, but

it doesn't exercise your mental muscles enough. Take time for yourself and create whatever you want, regardless of utility. It will give you a purpose that you wholly own."

Richard tapped away on his keyboard, emailing his old friend Zachary in Lebanon at the relatively new Middle Eastern Institute of Time (MEIT) in response to his paper on advancements in space timekeeping. It discussed that ground-based atomic clocks were fundamental to deep-space navigation. However, they were too large to be flown into space, resulting in tracking data being collected and processed on Earth for most deep-space navigation applications. A few years ago, MEIT created the Deep Space Atomic Clock (DSAC), a miniaturized stable mercury ion atomic clock. The technology used the mercury ion's hyperfine transition frequency property to stabilize a quartz oscillator's frequency output to a nearly constant value. For The American Dream mission, NIST took over management of the research for the next generation of space clocks called DSAC II, while MEIT continued to perform the hands-on work.

Sometimes Richard fantasized about working side by side with Zachary again, but in that flurry of scientific research happening in Lebanon right now. The top scientists from around the world flocked to the mountainside to study Eli, the original telekinetic, at his institution Enhanced Humanity. It pledged to make its research available to all so that everyone could one day be enhanced with telekinesis. As scientists and funding poured into Lebanon, developments in other fields were made, including timekeeping, which led to the formation of MEIT. This new community had become so successful that many saw the possibility of a new technocratic state where science would reign supreme. Zachary moved there to work at MEIT under this dream, and he even offered Richard a place. But Richard stayed to cultivate the next generation of scientific minds stateside in fear that they would wither away otherwise, despite his dislike for the current American leadership. He also disliked unpredictability, that's why he became a scientist to predict outcomes based on scientific principles. Maryland was home, and he knew it very well. But as he received updates on Zachary's achievements, he couldn't help but feel a little jealous and proud.

A digital watch made a slight beep in the background; papers and objects moved behind the monitor. Richard looked at the time on the lower right-hand side of the computer screen. It read 15:00, closing time. He stood, pushed his desk chair

backward, and flattened his pants. He walked to the entrance on the far left and grabbed his coat off the rack. The students surrounded him. He opened the door and walked up the stairs. They followed him like little duckies, passed the security checkpoints, and to the front entrance. Jim and Nathan walked towards the parking lot, waving goodbye to the rest, who were waiting for relatives to pick them up. Richard watched as each colleague slowly departed. He made himself available for any parent that wished to talk. A few routinely asked for updates on the child's behavior, success, and the project. Building rapport with the guardians was essential for the continued attendance of their dependents. With the widespread terrorist attacks and growing concern about militias, safety was top-of-mind. Richard reassured them by reiterating the Pentagon's defense initiative talking points and the persistently updated security protocols. When the last minivan sped off into the distance, Richard trudged back into the lab.

Richard pulled a cup of shrimp ramen from the food pantry, filled it with water, and microwaved it. In minutes he savored each noodle while hunching over a workbench covered in nixie tubes and 0.5mm solder. He'd spent a pretty penny shipping the tubes from Eastern Europe. They exhumed a warm steampunk glow when electrified and were the primary component of a new desk clock. He'd work late into the night till the chimes of the clocks and ticks of his watch lulled him asleep.

An alarm rang the following day, with Richard sprawled along a couch in the workshop. He'd replace his uniform with fresh clothes and a self-made automatic mechanical watch as an accent. The pearl face had meticulously etched ripples, thin polished hands abruptly ticked to metal bars, and its movement was visible via a skeleton case back. This was the only possession he cherished. It felt irreplaceable, not just because of its age and the journey to create, but now with his fiddly hands, Richard questioned his ability to replicate it. The watch was the grand creation of his apprenticeship and a time machine to his memories. At this moment, all Richard could do was reminiscence about the first time meeting Mr. Parker.

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The massive oak trees staggered the approaching visitor, offering a wall of protection to the cottage's domain while silencing the noise from the street. Birds enticed the visitors with their wondrous song and the rocky pathway echoed footsteps in reply. Tulips and roses infused the air, accenting the quaint

cottage before him. Curved wood and small windows wrapped the perimeter while the front door was thick and round.

Intending to make an excellent first impression, he kicked his dark brown shoes on the doormat, swooped his hair to the side, rearranged his brown fuzzy cardigan, and tucked in a multi-color flannel. Richard closed his eyes and knocked on the door. Feet shuffled across the boundary. The door creaked open, and the smell of apple and cinnamon flowed through Richard's nostrils. Images of the tasty treat flashed in his brain, and he felt himself drifting away in thought. A boy not much older than Richard, with similarly combed brown hair and a white-pink complexion, stood before him. His clothes popped with different textures among the layering, and the roughness had a comfortable appeal that rendered an earthy personality.

"You must be Richard. Hopefully, your travel was pleasant," said the older boy as he gestured into the cottage. He continued, "I'm the lead apprentice here. My name's Zachary. You will work with me, not Mr. Parker. You can still be friendly with him, but he's usually too busy for idle chit-chat."

Richard said, "I'll keep our conversations strictly business, then. I appreciate the opportunity you are providing me, and I'll take knowledge regardless of whose teaching."

Zachary replied, "That's the right attitude. No need for formalities with me. Efficiency and frankness are more important than niceties. Think of me as a friend that has been around the block a few times."

Richard caught glimpses of curious eyes peering from the darkness as he entered. The floor was oak, and the furniture smelled of pine. The walls were adorned with tinkers of various shapes and sizes. Richard wondered if they were permanent fixtures or placeholders awaiting client pickup. The tunes of the seconds were synchronized, and the medley of sounds diffused from the walls providing an omnipresent sensation of time.

Richard was led to an old man in the kitchen with hair that formed a snowy peak. He wore a light blue oxford cloth button-down layered over a brown utility jacket with filled pockets holding bulging timepieces. Mr. Parker smiled and spoke, "Perfect timing. The pie has finally cooled down enough. You must be the new apprentice, Richard, is it?"

He handed him a piece, which Richard gladly received,

saying, "It's an honor to work with you, Mr. Parker. Once again, thank you for the position. I'll show my gratitude through my work."

Mr. Parker smiled, "I'm sure you will. For now, please enjoy your food."

As Richard began funneling pieces of pie into his mouth, Mr. Parker spoke, "I've got a few things to say that you only need to listen to. This opportunity is unique and challenging. You'll learn about thousands of years of innovation tied to the art of timekeeping. Most recruits come in with a solid ambition to see results fast. Some burn out when they realize hard work takes countless hours fiddling with minor details where nothing seems to go your way. Don't be disheartened. This is a lifelong pursuit, not a weekend fling. We're working with time, of all things. At least when you look at the clock to mark the end of your day, you can see it with greater appreciation."

The memories transitioned to a period much later in Richard's stay. Late at night, while the household slept, Richard sat at his lightly illuminated wooden workbench, his vision focused on an array of metal components by a variable magnifying glass. He handled tiny pieces with anti-magnetic tweezers, while fingers protected by latex cots adjusted larger surfaces. Occasionally, Richard referenced blueprints that arranged the timepiece in various angles and stages. His design was firmly engrained in his mind, but a quick check boosted his confidence. This was the last stage of a long process. After multiple design revisions and critiques at Zachary's request. Richard was finally putting all the pieces together. The small metal gears and springs gleamed in the soft light of the desk lamp, casting intricate shadows across the room. His fingers moved with practiced ease, each motion flowed seamlessly into the next, carefully manipulating the complex pieces. As he finished putting the watch together, he wound the mechanism and set the time. He watched the sweep of the hands and held it close to his ear. There was a satisfying sound of the gears turning and the steady tick-tock of the second hand.

Richard yelled, "Huzzah!"

Zachary's sleepily groaned, "Mom... Richar... Bedtime...?!" which made Richard wince at his disruptive nighttime shenanigans. For the sanity of his roommates, he cheered and danced silently while adoring this monumental achievement.



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With age, Richard slowly emulated Mr. Parker by fostering a community at NIST. When he graduated, he raised the timekeeping torch and pledged to pursue time in its purest form.

Richard evangelized just like Mr. Parker, "Only when time is measured most precisely can humanity have a chance to manipulate it."

When matter and energy decayed into the black void, their research would be the basis of that reversal. Richard re-adjusted the watch back to his wrist with a reaffirmed purpose. With a ceramic mug filled to the brim with chamomile tea, he took a deep breath and walked down to the center of the laboratory.

Students were already working on projects while Richard circled the space. After a few nods and "Good morning," he sat back at his desk to catch up on emails.

He received a notification and was immediately pulled into a security meeting detailing updates on potential threats on the outside, specifically information on a faction known as "The Now". The faction claimed that a critical mass of dissidents had formed and that soon America would fall. Competing factions led by militaristic zealots would carve up the country, leaving the scientific community to fend for itself. The Now were self-proclaimed preservationists of scientific truth against rising authoritarian barbarisms.

Their anonymous founder, commonly called Face< summarized their end goal, "We'll rise from the ashes of this sullen state and create a new data-backed technocratic society. We'll have new symbols not defined by religious extremists, but those that glorify our scientific achievements and define our foundations."

The most flagrant symbol of Christian dogma was how society measured time. In a manifesto, Face< said, "Time should not be based on the birth of Christ. We'll reset the global clocks and create a new age of logic and reason. No more will these people who praise an invisible man in the sky subject us to caveman sentimentalities."

With the context behind them, the head of security told Richard, "MEIT has fallen and there is now a war in Lebanon. We know you had colleagues over there and we are doing our best to

save as many people as possible. The Now has taken ownership of the attack, not only to reset time but to disrupt The American Dream mission. They see its existence as a challenge and will do anything they can to blow it out of the sky and prevent us from any future attempts. Please report any suspicious behavior you see. We, unfortunately, have The Now sympathizers amongst our ranks. We must do what we can to prevent the same tragedy from repeating over here."

Richard teased his hair and contemplated the repercussions of what he'd just learned. His boss pulled him to the side to clarify the path forward. He rubbed Richard's back and spoke, "You have our full support to take off as much time as you need. However, the DASC II mission is still our agency's top priority, and, with the situation in Lebanon, we are taking over the development of the project. Any assets we can get from there will be shipped immediately. In the meantime, we're beefing up security here. But to reduce the risk to our most vulnerable colleagues, all children will return home until this situation is resolved. In addition, the faculty that remains will need to relocate onsite with their families."

Richard sat dumbfounded, stared past the director, and muttered, "Ok."

His mind attacked his nerves and tensed his muscles. His pores became fountains of sweat to cool the heat of his beating heart. Richard wiped his face, sipped his now lukewarm tea, and deeply breathed in the herbal smell.

*What in the world is happening to society? Will they bury us within the darkest depths of the Earth, reduced to sticks and stones for my research? Am I, too, entitled to just perform my duties and raise the youth with a passion for achievement? Why must we be subjected to endless power struggles by the newest flavor of anti-someone else's authority aristocrats? I'm too old to run and fight. Will I just tend to the machines till I'm turned to dust? Must they not condemn the youth and simply protect them as they claim?*

Filled with emotions and adrenaline, Richard stood up and strolled to the front of the lab. In a loud, confident voice he said, "I'm going to need everyone here for a moment to sit and listen to me."

Andrew placed resistors down, Jim shut off a multimeter, Alex walked back to his desk with a manual, and Nathan looked

around to ensure everyone followed Richard's orders.

Richard collected his thoughts, then said, "For security reasons, for many of you, this will be your last day in the lab. MEIT has been attacked and the same group wishes to do the same to us. Our working relationship will be suspended until that threat is neutralized. You are some of the brightest minds that I've had the pleasure of working with. Spend the rest of today wrapping up your projects and saying goodbye amongst yourselves."

Mr. Parker's parting words to Richard felt more relevant than ever, and so Richard said, "The events we must endure do not define us. Always strive to do what's right, even when it's not the easiest path. Remember, your actions and decisions affect yourself and those around you. Never stop pursuing knowledge. Education is a lifelong vocation; pursuing knowledge will lead you to places you never thought possible. Always keep an open heart and mind, from which only positive impacts can come from you."

Richard set some time aside privately with each member of the crew. He'd give them personal recommendations for their path forward. Jim and Nathan would be accelerated through their apprenticeships so that they could independently operate a backup facility. They happily accepted given they already dedicated many years of their lives to the program and the disruption of leaving would have momentous consequences for their future. Richard then approached Alex to fill their positions once they'd transitioned.

Alex responded, "We'll need to negotiate much higher compensation given the dangers to my life. I'll need support to move my belongings and will need to preview the accommodations. We'll also need to set some ground rules to enable a healthy work-life balance."

With extensive back-and-forth and escalations to senior management, Richard arranged an unprecedented package for Alex, given his level. Andrew was a different story. Richard denied him from staying at the lab. He said, "You're incredibly brilliant but much too young. We'll send you some equipment to tinker with at home, and I'll be a phone call away."

Andrew spoke, "I accept the risk. I love it here. Please let me stay. I know I'm getting close to a breakthrough!"

Richard cut him off. "This wasn't a simple decision. I know you'll find a breakthrough one day but in a place far away from this lab."

Andrew began to tear up. Richard walked up, hugged him, and said, "I'm sorry. This situation isn't fair. We're all making it through this together. I'll miss you, my young protégé."

Andrew smiled, "I like when you call me protégé, Dad."

Richard shook his head instinctively while hiding a slight smile.

The usual exuberant sounds of youth were gone when Richard looked at his workshop. Nathan's face showed confusion with no one for him to boss around. Jim's flock of young students was missing too. Only Alex looked excited at the new arrangement. Fortunately for the rest, the new directive provided little room for their minds to wander. Richard strongly suggested that work be the outlet for their frustrations.

Therefore, the work days became longer with no natural break in the day. Only Alex kept to his contractually defined schedule. When the clock hit 4 pm, he was a ghost. He'd take his food rations to his makeshift trailer home. He didn't hate his coworkers. But he felt if he stayed in the work facilities, he'd get roped into their unbalanced workaholic tendencies. Within his trailer, he had more leverage to say no. In this space, they could visit him as friends with strict enforcement of non-work-related activities and conversation. For many nights, he spent his free time playing video games with his online friends, not thinking much of the others.

But Alex could see how the social isolation from their friends and families affected the others. He reached out to Jim after watching him physically degrade through the overconsumption of sugary donuts to fill the swelling pit in his heart. Jim happily joined the gaming sessions. The assimilation was quick, though frequently Jim watched in awe at Alex and his friends' skills across video game genres. The emotional uplift Jim experienced was enormous and noticeable to Nathan, who confronted Alex, "I want into your little group. I'm sick of only working out in my free time."

Alex said, "No, I'd rather keep this group small."

That wasn't acceptable to Nathan, so he gradually wore Alex

down until he reconsidered. His integration into the group was the opposite of Jim's. While he was abysmal socially, he made up for it through precisely executed tactical movements.

In Nathan's first interaction, he announced, "You're about to witness greatness, you nerds. Let's go!"

Everyone severely reduced his mic volume. Nathan was annoying because, although he gloated excessively, he backed it up. When you played team-based shooting games with him, it felt like you were methodically taking down your opponents. His mental recovery was quick too with this new outlet to boss people around in.

Eventually, the long-awaited materials for DSAC II arrived: mercury, flight computers, space interfaces, and instruments for testing and calibration. Richard couldn't help but tinker with it immediately. With Jim's help, he deposited the equipment into a large sterile calibration room. They mounted it in the center, surrounded by equipment to measure and adjust its performance. Jim checked the temperature and pressure sensors to ensure they were within the required range. Richard then connected a laptop to DSAC's flight computer and initiated the calibration process. A series of commands and prompts guided him. As he worked, he noticed the output was slightly erratic, with occasional anomalies in the signal.

Jim said, "It may be a calibration issue."

Once Richard hooked the response to a signal analyzer, he noticed an unnatural digital modulation applied, which couldn't relate to any source of interference. He asked Jim, "Why don't you run and get lunch? I want to play around with this a bit."

With suspicion, Richard found a looped binary encoded message, "Richard, it's your old friend Zachary. The United States government has pushed me into hiding. They felt threatened by Enhanced Humanity and sent super-soldier commandos to destroy the institution and overthrow the sovereign nation that protected them. That attack spilled over to MEIT and now they are both gone. Although there were plenty of The Now sympathizers at MEIT and Enhanced Humanity, they operated as a distinct organization. This is hard for me to admit, but I was there during the attack on Enhanced Humanity, as a double agent for America. I helped those monsters kill my friends. Even though I felt compelled because the President's goons threatened my family, it doesn't justify the evil I caused. During the

battle, when my colleagues dropped like flies, I hid under a fallen tree. Eli fought off the soldiers, but the damage was done. When he found me amongst the rubble, he showed me mercy so that I could atone for my sins. Afterward, The Now supported me when I felt alone and rescued my family. From my time with them, I realized scientific thought will die unless we fight back. Your current government is desperate to maintain power and will sacrifice anyone for that. They operate a fractured empire that's quickly being overrun by defecting super soldiers. Soon NIST will fall, and I don't want you on the outside being killed for a can of tuna. Help us, don't be a pawn! Fight back against The American Dream mission, because all it serves is a dictator who wants to extend his reign of terror!"

Richard saw the tiny boy who first greeted him at the door of Mr. Parker's home. When Richard walked into the mess hall and looked at Jim, he saw Zachary's warm charm in him. *I can't believe that Richard is fighting against the country that bred him. How could he believe we're responsible for the implosion of Lebanon when it's a failed state with endless corruption and countless warring factions? The Now seeks to destroy this country as they did with Lebanon. Plus, the advancement of timekeeping in space needs to happen regardless of who's in control. I despise our leadership, but I love my country. Zachary's looking for support. I must make my allegiance clear.*

Richard opened an email client on his laptop. He wrote the most emotionally taxing message of his life, "Friends and colleagues, based on the destruction of MEIT and the growing threat of The Now, I felt compelled to share my position with those who may find themselves in future moral dilemmas. The Now seeks to establish a technocratic society through violence. They claim America will abandon its scientists in the face of threats, but without The Now and other terrorist organizations, there wouldn't be any threats. You may think pragmatically and support whoever is victorious, expecting that no matter who is in charge, you'll be able to continue your research. If you adopt that thinking, it will corrupt you into turning a blind eye to atrocities. Even with all the horrible politicians, special interest groups, and asinine laws, society can still peacefully improve through knowledge. Therefore, we must continue to support this great nation, or else we will experience an endless cycle of violent revolutions. These are the moments where bravery and honor truly shine."

Richard emailed a broad recipient pool, ensuring Zachary was among them.

Weeks passed, and the countless hours spent on DSAC II culminated in this moment. Jim, Alex, Nathan, and Richard formed a viewing party in the laboratory's center and eagerly awaited The American Dream's launch into space at NASA's Kennedy Space Center. They established a live video conference call with a group of engineers and technicians within the control room in case any problems arose with the equipment. The room was abuzz with activity as they made final preparations for the launch.

As the countdown clock ticked away, the scientists exchanged glances filled with anticipation. The air was charged with a mix of hope and tension. But suddenly, the room plunged into chaos. Alarms blared, and the lights flickered as the screens glitched. A wave of panic swept through the scientists as they realized they were under a cyber attack. Frantically typing on keyboards and shouting orders, they struggled to regain control of the situation.

Amidst the chaos, distant gunfire echoed through the air. Fear and uncertainty gripped the room as the scientists desperately tried to comprehend the dual threat they were facing.

But then, just as quickly as the chaos had erupted, a sudden calm fell over the room. The gunfire ceased, and the screens stabilized. A hush fell over the scientists as they witnessed an astonishing sight. A group of soldiers, clad in advanced combat gear, materialized on the screens. These were no ordinary soldiers; they were telekinetic.

In an awe-inspiring display of power, the soldiers floated in mid-air and formed a protective invisible force field around the rocket, shielding it from any potential harm. Despite the ongoing cyber attack and the distant threat of violence, the countdown resumed. When the countdown approached zero, the scientists held their breath. Outside the windows, they saw the massive vehicle poised for liftoff on the launchpad, flames billowing from the engines. When the engines roared to life, the scientists cheered and whooped excitedly, watching as the rocket slowly lifted off the pad, gaining speed and altitude as it climbed higher and higher into the sky.

Over the next few minutes, Richard's crew closely monitored the DSAC's telemetry data, ensuring the clock was functioning correctly and sending back accurate readings. As the rocket disappeared from view, they turned to each other, grinning with

excitement and relief. "I was getting worried there for a moment, but it looks like we made it!"

Jim enthusiastically said, high-fiving Alex and Nathan. "Congratulations to everyone on a successful launch."

Richard said. "This is a tremendous step forward for space exploration and preserving our culture, and we couldn't have done it without everyone's hard work and dedication."

Richard clank glasses of beer with the rest. Given his tendency to avoid alcohol, he got significantly drunker than he liked.

The following day, Richard groggily sat at his desk, reviewing the schedule for the day, when a shock vibrated through the foundation of the building. Suddenly, the door burst open, and several individuals rushed in, wearing masks and brandishing weapons. They shouted, "The Now is in control of this facility! This will be the dawn of a new age! Surrender with your hands in the air!"

Richard watched, frozen in fear, as one approached, pointing a gun at his chest. In a muffled voice, the soldier asked, "Where is everyone else?"

Richard suggested they check the calibration room, knowing that it was unoccupied, hoping to create valuable time for his colleagues to escape. He fumbled with his security keys to provide access, while his limbs spasmed from fear. One insurgent grabbed him roughly by the arm and pulled him away when it became clear of Richard's intentions. While they re-entered the workbench room, reinforcements from the national guard, accompanied by Nathan, retaliated with gunfire. Richard, caught in the middle, was knocked to the ground by shrapnel and debris. His vision then faded to black.

An unknown amount of time passed. A splash of water on his face brought Richard back to consciousness. An unmasked medic in The Now's uniform was bandaging his shoulder and wrist. Instinctively, he checked his watch, but its crystal was cracked with the hands frozen from the earlier impact. Richard looked around and saw sheets covering the dead security officers at NIST. At the location he last saw Nathan sat Jim and Alex, who caught Richard's eyes and then peered at the sheet beside them. He didn't want to believe what had happened to Nathan, but the tears in their eyes confirmed his unwanted suspicions. The other



insurgents moved away as their leader walked forward. He removed his mask to reveal the familiar face of Zachary.

Richard disassociated from reality, as it felt too large to bear. Zachary whispered, "I'm sorry for everything that's happened. We tried to reduce casualties. It's unfortunate that you were injured and Nathan was amongst the soldiers. Things got chaotic while simultaneously securing the premises and deactivating the explosives."

Richard replied, "Explosives?"

Zachary pointed to the broken maintenance closet, which enclosed a pile of crates, and said, "They never intended for anyone to seize control. They planned to scorch the earth if they lost. Meanwhile, they'd say we'd suicide bombed the place."

Richard shook his head in disbelief, but was too emotionally drained to delve into the intricacies of the words flopping in his face. Zachary continued, "They don't care about science. They'd tear the world down if it meant preserving their power. These military generals and intelligence operatives create chaos with no accountability."

Richard started dry heaving, only able to muster, "Please, shut up!" before closing his eyes.

People shuffled quickly around him. Zachary yelled commands to the team. The rest became a blur as they pulled Richard into a white van.

This time, Richard slept many hours in a comfortable bed. Someone came periodically to change his bandages. Early in the recovery process, Jim and Alex watched and talked with him at his bedside. They'd discussed nicer days and danced around the trauma they experienced. There was the feeling that *The Now* monitored their conversations and they couldn't be their authentic, vulnerable selves.

Zachary visited one day and said, "I can't say sorry enough. I facilitated violence for my beliefs. We made a judgment call that we could preserve our scientific institutions and knowledge better by seizing it ourselves, rather than picking up the pieces after the system imploded. There will be no way to tell if we made the correct decision. But even if it was, it won't wash the sins we've committed."

Richard spoke, "What you've done to my colleagues and Nathan is unforgivable. They have warped you into something unrecognizable to me."

Zachary said, "When we created the first telekinetic beings, that should have propelled us into a golden age of humanity. Instead of helping the disabled or revolutionizing transportation, they created super soldiers and threatened to crush the world unless they did the same."

Richard said, "What do you want from me?"

Zachary looked at him carefully and said, "You're not a prisoner. I'd like you to join us and continue doing your research. You'll have more freedom to do basic science and define an area for discovery. We'll create a haven for you and your students if they decide to join. There is so much yet to be done. Remember, *only when time is measured most precisely can humanity have a chance to manipulate it.*"

Richard replied, "Don't you dare speak Mr. Parker's words. We had safety before you took it away from us."

Zachary interjected and said, "It was a false sense of security. People are dying all around. You lived in a bubble that filtered information. Don't let only my words guide you, verify what I've said, go see it with your own eyes. My door will always be open to you."

Richard took the advice and left with Jim and Alex. He'd never return, because although he could never prove Zachary wrong, his loyalty stayed with a society that had provided him so much. The morally right decision was too ambiguous now, and he'd already lost too much. The taxing mental toll was the catalyst for his early retirement on a remote island far away. His colleagues followed similar paths. Jim had no reason to stay. All the people in his community were long gone, and he missed his family and friends too much. Contrarily, Alex didn't believe any amount of hazard pay could relieve the trauma he'd continue to experience within the facility. As the days passed, Richard watched from the outside as The Now built a new society. He saw how their ideas and perspectives infected more people and the discoveries they'd make as other institutions crumbled around the world. Eli watched from the sidelines and wondered if he had made the right choice. Deep down, he knew he couldn't compromise his principles, even if it meant missing out on the scientific community that they were building.

Over time, Jim and Alex found employment in other industries. Richard received regular updates from them and his other students. Andrew still had a burning ambition to make a name for himself and found support in Zachary's camp. He was unwilling to squander his potential when so many discoveries were yet to be made. Richard watched with a heavy heart as his prized student became more and more involved with The Now. He knew that the world had become complex and that the lines between right and wrong constantly shifted. In addition, he lived a fruitful life and couldn't suggest that Andrew seclude himself from the world just as he'd done. In the end, Richard continued to live his life outside, watching and waiting for a better future, even when things worsened. He couldn't predict what would happen, but he remained steadfast. Occasionally, he looked at the wristwatch that brought him memories of his childhood and remembered the day when time had stopped for him and reset for the world.