

Bjørn's Game

Chapter 1

"May I present our keynote speaker, the founder of nanoprogramming, Dr. Bjørn Hawkins!"

The crowd erupts in applause as Bjørn strides across the platform. He paces like a caged leopard, then finally shouts over their cheers:

"You've heard the story of a revolutionary programmer who changed the world with wild nano-bot theories." Silence settles over the crowd and every eye fixes on him, waiting.

Bjørn pauses, then with perfect timing continues quietly, "But that story is a small reflection of a greater one." He grows louder, "the story of courage strong enough to overcome savage mother nature," he reaches the climax, shouting "the story of our human race!"

As the crowd bursts into applause, a grey-haired man in a cloak leans over, whispering to his apprentice: "Go ahead, Jared. This is the perfect time."

Jared draws a sweating hand from his cloak pocket, gently opening it in the direction of the stage to release a robotic insect.

On stage, Bjørn continues, "But I'm getting ahead of myself. I'm Bjørn Hawkins, I'm married to my beautiful wife, Brianna, and we're expecting our first child – a boy – any day now."

The insect buzzes toward Bjørn at full speed, heading directly for his legs.

"Slow down, Chryssa," Jared mutters, "you're going to run into him!"

Chryssa, in a dark room surrounded by glowing screens, nods and pulls back on the throttle.

The robotic dragonfly tilts back in an attempt to slow down and then twists left, narrowly missing Bjørn's leg.

Jared cringes and clenches his fists. *Hold your tongue*, he thinks to himself, *adding pressure isn't going to help her*. He draws a slow breath and prays.

Father, please guide her hand and blind the surveillance team. Let us go unnoticed.

Jasmine, a frizzy-haired girl sitting next to Chryssa in the control room, sees Jared's stress level spike.

She leans forward, "Everything's gonna be just fine, Jared. We're in good hands."

Jared turns his attention back to Bjørn, who, oblivious to the insect now approaching behind him, looks over the excited crowd. *They're really into this*, he thinks, *it just gets better every year!*

"You call me a hero for believing in the potential of nanobots – and rightly so. I slaved night and day for years while everyone called me a fool – but in the end, I armed humanity with the most constructive technology ever invented – *nanites*."

"I fashioned the ultimate biotechnology out of the ashes of a nuclear holocaust, rivaling the nuclear and biological wonders of our fathers but this time for life and healing instead of war. For centuries the twin evils of nationalism and religious fanaticism have held sway over humanity, but time has shown that dignity and moral goodness do indeed course through our veins and that they will triumph in the end."

Jared grinds his teeth and whispers, "His 'wondrous biotechnology' has committed the greatest atrocity of all time, forcing millions into brain damage chambers to be victimized by his precious nanites – and he's proclaiming humanity's essential *goodness?!'*"

“Don’t hate him, Jared,” Enoch replies, “he doesn’t know what his tool’s being used for. Just beg God to soften his heart when we show him.”

Chryssa pulls back on the throttle, slowing the dragonfly to a hovering standstill.

“Here goes nothing,” she touches a *mist* button on a screen and watches the robot-insect begin to spray its payload of diluted sodium amalgam, then shifts the wings into *fan* mode, blowing the mist towards Bjørn.

“Chryssa, he’s moving!”

She jerks her hand to the screen, stopping the spray, then stares in disbelief as Bjørn’s legs walk away and the cloud of mist dissipates.

“I’ve only got half a tank left,” Chryssa’s voice echoes over Enoch’s audio-nerve pickup, tight with desperation. “Enoch, what do I do?”

The old man closes his eyes and looks down, letting out a slow, controlled breath. After a few moments, he straightens up. “Chryssa?” Enoch’s voice is as calm as a still ocean.

“Yes?”

“Chryssa, can you *guarantee* the same thing won’t happen again?”

“No...” Her brow crinkles. *What’s he getting at?*

“Who can, Chryssa?”

“Uh... I guess only God can.”

“Do you think He might be willing?”

Chryssa buries her head in her hands, strands of blue and black hair tumbling down both sides. She sighs in frustration. “I don’t know... *maybe*.”

“Then ask Him to. Do your best and trust that He knows what He’s doing, whether He brings success – or failure.” She nods. “Roger. I’m going in.”

Chryssa eases the throttle forward and switches her audio and video to *full immersion*. Instantly she’s enveloped in the buzz of throbbing wings, speeding along the surface of a carbonite stage.

Jesus, I’m going to do my best. Would you please make this work?

Next to her, in the black of the control room, Jasmine looks up at some new activity on the top screen. She switches off Chryssa’s radio.

“Enoch? Jared? We might have trouble.”

“What is it?”

“You know the database trigger that monitors activity on your IDs? Well, somebody’s taken an interest in you.”

“Where’s it coming from?” Enoch looks over his shoulder, scanning the edges of the crowd.

“Computer, please trace-route this,” Jasmine commands as she taps the global protocol address.

The results blip on the screen.

“It’s coming from a government sub-net in your district. Should I try to log onto it?”

Enoch spots a security officer and two soldiers near the perimeter of the crowd. The officer is gesturing his direction.

“Thanks, Jasmine, but... I don’t think we have the time.

Don’t look, Jared, but we’ve got a cop and two soldiers at three o’clock.”

Chryssa approaches Bjørn’s feet and the hum of pulsing wings drops to a lower pitch as she transitions to a hovering standstill.

Jesus, only You can guarantee that this will work. She relaxes her back and shoulder muscles. I’m just going to do my best and trust You with the results.

Chryssa edges a little closer to Bjørn's feet and presses *mist* again.

Jared risks a glance over his shoulder and whispers, "Enoch, the soldiers are half-way here – c'mon, let's go!" They start edging their way through the crowd.

Words flash into Bjørn's vision, just above his speech notes: "Your wife's in labor."

He glances down at his aide. She mouths the words "right now".

She looks serious, he thinks.

Bjørn turns his attention to the crowd.

"I just got word that my wife is in labor at the hospital, so I'm going to have to cut things a little shorter than planned here."

He switches off his notes.

"What I'm getting at is this: Our lives need to reflect the fundamental principles of nano-programming. Each of us is programmed uniquely, like a nanite, based on our interests and motivations and a certain amount of DNA randomization. But the critical thing – for us as individuals, just like for the nanites – is that together, as a society, we're working towards a common goal."

"For nanites, that goal is usually a reconstructive surgery or a nerve tap or post-radiation cell rejuvenation. But for humanity, that goal should be – and indeed *must* be – humanity's greater good."

Chryssa empties the rest of the payload and switches out of *immersion* mode, holding her breath as the readout of sodium amalgam coverage climbs: 87%, 89%, 92%, 94%, 97%, 99%, 100%.

"Yes!" She slams her fist on the desk and looks up past the ceiling, grinning ear to ear. "Thank you, Jesus!"

Enoch looks to Jared as the crowd starts to break up, "Ready?"

Jared nods, "Let's go."

He ducks out of view and pushes a button on his belt, releasing a mild microwave that mingles with his body's bioelectric field. His skin prickles and suddenly his stomach drops.

Ugh. I feel sick.

The world around them turns into shafts of golden light as they shift along the fifth dimension. A steady hum vibrates up their legs and they begin running through the yellow and orange shimmering people as they make their way towards the exit.

"Slow down," Enoch tells Jared over the hum.

They're approaching the perimeter and soldiers patrol the crowd on each side, searching.

"Now!" They plunge past the crowd, heading for the wall.

A soldier catches a faint glimmer of gold, "Hey! I think I see something!"

He turns to investigate, but they've already run through the wall, away from the tyranny of visual surveillance and into the anonymity of cyber security.