

THE JEVIN BANKS EXPERIENCE · BOOK 2

SINGULARITY

A JEVIN BANKS NOVEL

STEVEN
JAMES


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Steven James, *Singularity*
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To Eddie Brittain and Rick Altizer
Friends for life

I had a stick of CareFree gum, but it didn't work. I felt pretty good while I was blowing that bubble, but as soon as the gum lost its flavor, I was back to pondering my mortality.

—Mitch Hedberg, comedian

It is not difficult to avoid death, gentlemen of the jury; it is much more difficult to avoid wickedness, for it runs faster than death.

—Socrates in *Apology*

PART I

Interface

15 miles northeast of Las Vegas, Nevada

Plyotech Cybernetics Research & Development Facility

Sublevel 4

9:32 p.m.

“Cream? Sugar?”

“No. Black. Thank you.” Thad Becker had learned early on in this business not to allow anyone to add things to his drinks or season what he ate. It was a delicate balance—showing trust and exhibiting prudence. But in the end you can either be careful or you can pay the price.

He accepted the cup from the person he’d come here to see: a dark-haired, fit, Caucasian man in his late fifties who called himself Akinsanya—a Nigerian name that meant “the hero avenges.”

Thad had done his research. It’d taken calling in quite a few favors, but he’d found out who the guy really was: a retired Army colonel named Derek Byrne. A former sniper instructor, Byrne was not a man to be trifled with.

He also knew about the kind of research Byrne was focused on here at Plyotech: a program that was not, according to any of the company’s books, actually taking place. It was the kind of research the people who’d hired Thad had expressed keen interest in: robotics, mechatronics, informatics.

And, of course, cybernetics.

Which was what had brought him here.

They were in a high-tech conference room down the hall from where Byrne and his team did surgery on the primates, inserting the electrodes into their brains to see if the chimps could control mechanical apparatuses simply through the electrical activity generated in localized parts of their brains.

Here in the room where they were meeting, a robotic arm with an intricate and realistic-looking hand rose from a stand in the center of the table.

Byrne dumped a spoonful of light gray powder from an ornate ceramic bowl into his own cup. He swirled it into his drink until it disappeared, coloring the coffee a grayish-brown, then he took a sip.

It was not creamer. It was definitely not sugar.

Thad tried his coffee. As far as he could tell there was nothing unusual about the taste. “The people I represent,” he said, “are very interested in seeing the results you spoke about on the phone.”

“Yes.” Byrne sat facing Thad and the two hulking former Special Forces soldiers turned mercenaries whom he’d brought along with him. They were here to do a little work on Byrne if necessary, if the results weren’t satisfactory or if he proved too unwilling to share the findings. After all, Thad was a man of action and did not take kindly to people wasting his time.

An Indian gentleman in his mid-sixties and wearing a lab coat stood beside Byrne.

Thad took another sip, then set down his cup and gestured with an open hand toward the older man in the lab coat. “I was told we were going to be alone.”

“This is Dr. Malhotra,” Byrne replied. “He’s part of my team.”

Thad nodded politely to the doctor. “I’m pleased to meet you—and I mean no disrespect, but . . .” He eased his cup to the side, leaned forward, and eyed Byrne coolly. “I was told. We were going. To be meeting. Alone.”

A moment passed. Byrne's eyes flicked to the two men Thad had brought along. In the end he said nothing about their presence, but simply addressed the man at his side: "Doctor, perhaps you could step into the hallway while I demonstrate our progress to our three guests here."

"Certainly," Dr. Malhotra said in a thick accent, but in a tone that was impossible to read. Thad gestured for one of his men to escort the doctor out of the room. While he did, Thad's other man unbuttoned his jacket, revealing his holstered 9mm Glock 17, and smiled intimidatingly.

Byrne did not appear intimidated.

Once it was just the three of them, Thad folded his hands, laid them on the table, and directed his full attention at Byrne. "Now. I believe you have something to show me, Colonel." He added that last word to make sure Byrne realized he knew his real identity, that this sophomoric game of using a code name was not going to get him anywhere.

Without a word, Byrne rolled up his left sleeve to reveal a bandage encircling the middle of his forearm. He unwrapped it carefully, exposing a healing incision just over three centimeters long.

"How many were implanted?" Thad asked.

"The array contains one hundred and twelve electrodes."

"I would've thought the incision would be larger."

"We've made great strides lately in reducing the size of the unit."

Thad shifted his gaze to the robotic arm in the middle of the table. "Show me."

Byrne depressed a button at the base of the stand that supported the arm. The mechanical hand closed once and then rested in a partially flexed position.

He laid his left arm palm-up on the table and then slowly curled his hand into a fist. As he did, the robotic hand replicated the gesture precisely, down to the minutest flexion of each finger. The colonel twisted his hand and then flattened it and formed a fist again, all gestures that were mirrored exactly by the robotic hand.

“The implant,” he said, “is only four days old, and the body tissue around it is already pulling it into position in my arm, giving us every reason to believe that the permanent implants won’t be rejected by the recipients.”

“Yes, okay,” Thad said somewhat impatiently, “you can remotely control the robotic hand when you move your hand, but that’s not what we were promised; we’ve seen that before. I was told you were—”

“Neural impulses. The nervous system.”

“Yes.”

“Slide your coffee cup closer to the arm.”

Thad did as the colonel requested, and then Byrne took two long, slow breaths, closed his eyes, and remained completely still.

A moment later, the robotic hand slowly opened and rotated counterclockwise. The mechanical arm angled toward the table while Byrne opened his eyes and concentrated, staring intently at the cup.

The arm bent at its artificial elbow and wrist, curled the pointer finger through the cup handle, and depressed the thumb and middle finger in opposition against the handle, just as a human might do when picking up a coffee cup.

The cup was close to the base of the arm, creating an awkward angle, and just like people would naturally do, the robotic arm slid it out slightly to create a less abrupt angle for the wrist and then raised it.

All the while, Byrne did not move his own arm or hand at all. His fingers didn’t even twitch.

Finally, the robotic arm came to rest holding the cup in position as if it were about to lift it to someone’s waiting lips.

Byrne let out a slow breath.

“All that just by your thoughts?” Thad asked quietly.

The colonel nodded. “The electrodes connect to my nerves, and the same impulses that would move my own muscles can be used to—”

“Yes, yes.” Thad was already deep in thought and was not particularly interested in the physiological or neurological specifics—the

people he worked for could work through all of that. “How long did it take you to learn to do that? To control it that well?”

“Nearly a month.”

“You said this implant is four days old. How did . . . ?”

Byrne rolled up his other sleeve and exposed a series of six scars, some healed more than others, on his forearm.

“And you’re saying this same technology can be used with soldiers to move exoskeletons?” The scene in *Aliens* of Sigourney Weaver using the giant exoskeleton to fight the mother alien came to mind. That, and the perhaps more applicable and contemporary example of Iron Man fighting other exoskeleton-equipped bad guys.

But even in the movies, the characters needed to move their muscles to manipulate the robotic exoskeletons. This bionic technology that Thad was looking at was in an entirely different league.

Byrne said, “With the lightweight exolimbs we’re working on, direct brain-machine interfaces, targeted muscle reinnervation, and electrodes that are embedded in all four extremities, tomorrow’s soldiers will be able to carry three-hundred-pound packs at sprinting speeds while exerting 90 percent less energy than they would if they were running with no pack at all.”

“And”—Thad was musing aloud—“even if they get shot or lose the use of one or more limbs, they’ll still be able to move the exolimbs through their thoughts.”

“Eventually, that’s what we’re shooting for, yes. Paralysis will no longer be a detriment to battle readiness.”

Thad evaluated that. Yes, the people he worked for were going to be very interested in this indeed.

He knew Plyotech did some contract work for the Department of Defense’s research and development branch: DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. And that might prove to be a problem here.

“And the Pentagon?”

“They’re aware of our research but know nothing about our progress. You’re the first group we’ve contacted.”

As Thad was considering how to tell the colonel that he and his men would be needing to come with them now, tonight, he heard a heavy thud in the hallway. It was a sound he knew well—that of a body falling to the floor.

He gestured for the mercenary behind him to check it out, and the man whipped out his Glock and stalked toward the doorway.

Byrne watched silently from across the table.

Thad unholstered his own gun, but even as he did, he heard his man collapse behind him and felt himself becoming waveringly dizzy. He snapped around and saw the former Green Beret lying on the floor convulsing.

Thad spun and leveled his gun at Byrne, who was pulling on a pair of latex gloves.

“What did you do?” Despite his best efforts, Thad felt his arms growing heavy and slack.

Byrne spoke softly. “Put down your gun, Thad, before you hurt yourself.”

He was about to squeeze the trigger, but before he could, both arms fell limply to his sides, causing his weapon to topple harmlessly to the floor.

“The coffee?”

No, that doesn’t make sense because—

“No.” Byrne shook his head.

“The grips,” he muttered, “of the guns, you coated them . . .”

“With Dalpotol.” Byrne stood and approached him. “Yes.”

“But how did you . . . get to . . .” He was slumping in his chair now and finding it increasingly difficult to form his thoughts. His hands began shaking involuntarily.

“You and your men had an escort visit your room last night, my friend.” He rose and kicked the gun aside. “You shouldn’t have left

her alone, even for a minute. And you should have perhaps checked your weapons this morning. You can never be too careful about the people you trust.”

A wave of convulsions began wracking Thad’s body, and Byrne unpocketed a pill. “This is to stop the seizures.” He placed it on Thad’s tongue. “Do your best to swallow it.”

Thad actually believed him, yet in an act of defiance he tried to spit it out, but the pill had mostly dissolved already and his muscles were relaxing, the convulsions dissipating—however, none of that offered him any strength to go after Byrne.

The colonel walked past Thad toward the downed man. A moment later a handgun’s report echoed sharply through the room, and then Byrne returned and lowered Thad gently to the floor.

His head lolled to the side, and he saw that his man had been shot at point-blank range in the temple and was most definitely not twitching any longer.

Byrne straightened out Thad’s arms and legs, and though he tried his hardest to stop him, he was unable to fight him off, to stand, to resist at all.

“Do you know what the problem is with most medical research?” Byrne asked him.

Thad’s mind was reeling, his thoughts shifting across themselves, sliding into and out of focus. He tried his hardest to concentrate on what was happening, but he didn’t feel like he was able to bring his attention back into alignment at all. “What is . . . ?”

“The problem. With most medical research today. Do you know what it is?”

Thad tried to sit up but found it impossible. “The . . .”

“Human trials. It simply takes too long for a drug or a treatment strategy to be approved for human trial. Monkeys, yes. Mice, no problem. But in this case, we need to know if it’s possible for someone who has four paralyzed limbs to be able to use his thoughts to move the

robotic ones, and we need to find out as promptly as we can if we're going to move forward with this project. To do that we have to test the implants in that situation, and since this research hasn't exactly been made public yet, we couldn't just pull in any quadriplegic off the street for the experiment. You can see why it's necessary to use a volunteer from the inside. You have the honor of being that volunteer."

The realization of what was happening finally struck Thad, and struck him hard.

Four paralyzed limbs.

Four paralyzed—

He heard another gunshot in the hallway and recognized it as coming from the 9mm SIG P226 his other man had been carrying. However, he did not hold out much hope that he'd killed the doctor, but rather guessed he'd met the same fate as the former soldier lying fatally shot just a few feet away.

"There are different ways we could do this," Byrne went on. "For most people it happens through an accident—horseback riding, a car wreck, sometimes a football player has a head-on collision and snaps his neck. I think you'll appreciate that I want to get this right the first time. Here"—he touched Thad's spine near where it connected with the base of his skull—"a scalpel is much more precise, more reliable, and you shouldn't leave something like this to chance. We tried drugs on two other people. Neither made it through without needing a ventilator, and that's just not the result we're looking for here. A scalpel is really the way to go."

The door to the hallway opened and Dr. Malhotra appeared, accompanied by two orderlies in scrubs, rolling a gurney.

"The people . . . I work for . . ." Thad struggled to get that much out, but then his voice faded away into silence.

Byrne nodded and continued Thad's sentence as if he were the one who'd started it: "Have spoken with me, and we all agreed you'd make a suitable subject. Good musculature, adequate intelligence, no close family. No one to miss you."

No, this wasn't happening, this could not be happening.

They're going to paralyze you.

They're going to—

“Technically, you'll be a C4 tetraplegic, or a quadriplegic, if you prefer that term. We're aiming for neck movement, so you should be able to turn your head, maybe even shrug slightly. You'll need assistance, of course, with dressing, bathing, self-care; you'll no longer be able to control your bowel or bladder functions, but we'll have people here to attend to you. With the implants, you should be able to learn to control your exolimbs. With time.”

Thad struggled to move but couldn't even lift his arms.

The men lowered the gurney.

“On three,” the colonel said.

No, please, no—

They positioned themselves around him.

“One. Two. Three.”

The men eased Thad onto the gurney. As a precaution, they firmly secured his wrists and ankles with the wide leather straps riveted to the sides of the gurney, and then raised it again so they could wheel him out of the room.

He tugged desperately at the restraints, but it was clear he wasn't going anywhere. “I swear,” he mumbled, “I'll . . .”

Byrne put a hand reassuringly on his arm. “Just relax, Thad. My people know what they're doing. I'll see you after your surgery.”

Then he walked to the table and, using only his thoughts, made the robotic arm set down the cup, pick up the spoon, dip out some of the gray powder, mix it into the drink, and then hand it to him.

From where he lay, Thad saw it all.

The colonel was sipping the coffee when the orderlies wheeled Thad past the bodies of the two men he'd brought to protect him, and rolled him down the hallway toward the operating room.

Thad tried to scream out curses, threats, even a final cry for mercy,

but it was too late for any of that. He could only make soft, unintelligible gurgling sounds that no one paid any attention to.

They stationed the gurney beneath a wide, bright light in the operating theater where they had done the implant procedures on the monkeys.

As the men prepared for surgery, Thad heard a woman's voice: "Lemme see him."

He couldn't be sure, but he thought he recognized that—

Leaning over him, she came into view.

Yes, he did know her: a stunning blonde in her mid-twenties, nubile, blue-eyed, and fair-skinned, a woman with a quiet, simple laugh and a svelte, well-toned body.

She was the escort he'd hired last night, the woman he and his men had shared. She called herself Calista, but he had no idea if that was her real name.

"Can you keep him awake while you do it?" she asked Dr. Malhotra.

"We should be able to get by with a local anesthetic. Sure."

She trailed her finger along Thad's cheek. "That'd be cool. He was totally rude to me last night. I wanna see the look in his eyes when it happens."

One more time Thad tried and failed to beg them to stop.

He felt a sting in the back of his neck as they injected the anesthetic. Then Dr. Malhotra began the surgery of severing his spinal column while Calista watched curiously and, admittedly, somewhat grossed out, holding Thad's hand in hers while it all went down.