

"This is the greatest book in the history of the world, bar none, and I mean none."

— Clark Kent, author of *Under a Yellow Sun*

# THIS IS HOW YOU DIE

STORIES OF THE INSCRUTABLE,  
INFALLIBLE, INESCAPABLE **MACHINE OF DEATH**<sup>®</sup>



**PREVIEW #6**

EDITED BY **RYAN NORTH,**  
**MATTHEW BENNARDO,**  
& **DAVID MALKI !**

This is a PREVIEW COPY of a story that will be appearing in our book *This is How You Die*, out in July 2013 from Grand Central Publishing.

It's the sequel to our bestselling short story collection *Machine of Death*, which introduced the idea of a machine that can predict how you'll die. All of the the stories in both books are explorations into this common theme.

This story, "LAZARUS REACTOR FISSION SEQUENCE," is by Tom Francis. In the book, it'll be paired with an illustration by Les McClaine. We're releasing this story in advance thanks to the kind supporters of our Machine of Death card game Kickstarter, which is open for pledges through March 19, 2013!

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## **THE MACHINE HAD BEEN INVENTED A FEW YEARS AGO:**

a machine that could tell, from just a sample of your blood, how you were going to die. It didn't give you the date and it didn't give you specifics. It just spat out a sliver of paper upon which were printed, in careful block letters, the words "DROWNED" or "CANCER" or "OLD AGE" or "CHOKED ON A HANDFUL OF POPCORN." It let people know how they were going to die.

And it was frustratingly vague in its predictions: dark, and seemingly delighting in the ambiguities of language. "OLD AGE," it turned out, could mean either dying of natural causes or being shot by a bedridden man in a botched home invasion. The machine captured that old-world sense of irony in death: you can know how it's going to happen, but you'll still be surprised when it does.

We tested it before announcing it to the world, but testing took time—too much, since we had to wait for people to die. After four years had gone by and three people had died as the machine predicted, we shipped it out the door. There were now machines in every doctor's office and in booths at the mall. You could pay someone or you could probably get it done for free, but the result was the same no matter what machine you went to. They were, at least, consistent.

## LAZARUS REACTOR FISSION SEQUENCE

I STOOD BAREFOOT ON THE BEACH, about to give a keynote speech on something I knew nothing about, and looked at my audience. It consisted of my colleague Ex, the enemy agent he was holding captive, and a small crab. I started anyway.

“I’d like to welcome you all to the—” I realized I’d forgotten the name of the conference. I squinted against the sun to read the handwritten text on the large wooden sign Ex was gripping in both hands. “The 2086 Special Weapons and Tactics convention?”

“His slip says it happens at SWATCON 2086.” Ex shrugged as best he could while holding something that heavy. “Can I just hit him with this?”

I sighed. “Well, I usually prefer not to explain the plan in front of captured heroes, but yeah, you can just belt him. We can’t wait that long, and the plank is cheaper.”

The agent struggled with his cuffs. I cleared my throat.

“To the 2086 Special Weapons and Tactics conference here in, like, Bloomington, Indiana, I think it’s meant to be. This year I’m pleased to welcome as our guest speakers: a palm tree, and...this crab.” The crab looked at me.

I sensed I should wrap this up. “I hereby declare this conference official enough to count in death predictions, so I’ll bow pointlessly and try not to think about what happens next.”

I bowed pointlessly and turned away. I wiggled my toes in the sand a bit, then stared out at the sparkling sea until I heard the crack. My toes clenched. The crab scuttled by. The sun baked my hair.

That was when I started to wonder if my heart was still in the henchman business, or if I was just going through the evil motions. I tried not to look at the body as I walked back to the facility, and Ex hauled him to the furnace.

###

The Island of Dr. Jethmalani was my first henching job. We called him Dr. Jeth, just because it sounded like Dr. Death, but he wasn't really a supervillain. Well, he wasn't a supervillain until they started sending armed superheroes to kill him, and then suddenly he was the bad guy.

He bought the island to build the Lazarus Reactor, his brainchild and obsession. He was already planning it before he got tested: it's a type of nuclear reactor where the fission process moves through the core. That's what generates the power, but what makes it efficient is that each depleted part of the core is replenished by nuclear transmutation before it's needed again. He called it Lazarus because the zones spend four stages of the sequence dead before coming back to life. And because it has a z in it, which sounds cool.

If it worked, you'd need only a small amount of uranium 235 to kick-start the thing, and it could churn out ferocious amounts of power for hundreds of years—without ever requiring fuel or expending waste.

But if you're a governmental skeptic—and that would be putting it mildly for Dr. Jeth—you're not going to trust any one country with that kind of technology. Certainly not India—or the U.S.

When he got his test results back, that clinched it. He was going to die of LAZARUS REACTOR FISSION SEQUENCE, the process that kicks the completed device into full operation. He'd been given a piece of paper that told him he was absolutely certain to complete his life's work successfully. So he started to get ambitious.

I typed in my password and headed down into the lab, turning to check that the steel door sealed properly behind me. When I turned back, I ran into Di and internally panicked. *What am I wearing? Why don't I know that? Do I have secret agent blood on me? Why don't I just make it a rule to look good at all times?*

"Hey!" *Too upbeat, idiot.*

"Hey, Mort." She smiled, but you couldn't read much into that. What the hell was I about to say?

"Don't suppose anyone in the next batch dies PAINLESSLY DURING SLEEP, SAVING EVERYONE A LOT OF HASSLE?" I asked, regretting the joke immediately.

“Who? Oh, deaths! Sorry, I’m miles away. No, they’re all like AWKWARDLY SPECIFIC, ANNOYING MORT A BUNCH.” For some reason she did little robot-arm motions during her Machine of Death voice, making several of my organs melt. “Take a look.”

She handed me her phone, which I tried to take with an impossible mix of firm manliness and sensitive grace and ended up almost dropping. I read the list six times in three seconds, absorbed nothing, and handed it back to her.

“Cool.” *Get out. Get out now. Deaths are not cool. You like this person and enjoy talking to her, so you must end this conversation as quickly as possible to prevent further fuckups.*

“Could you mail those to me?” *Because I can’t absorb information in your presence.*

“Just have, actually!” *Phew.*

We said awkward good-byes and I headed off to reread the results at a time when my brain was not full of other things.

Mort isn’t my name, of course—I was creative director of mortality, and Dr. Jeth had us all go by titles.

Anyone else would have held off building the thing that would kill them, but I don’t think that even occurred to Jeth. Once the Lazarus Reactor was done, why would he need to be alive? That was all he was here to do.

So he bought an island. I can’t tell you which, but I can say money wasn’t an issue. That’s the main reason I was there—I knew a lot about death, and Jeth knew a lot about making people financially unrefusable offers.

None of us were wild about the death part, but it wasn’t our choice. The doctor’s intentions were good—clean power for all—and he was getting there at an incredible pace without hurting anyone. But there’s nothing civilization hates more than success they’re not having. So they didn’t send the Nobel commission; they sent troops.

At first Dr. Jeth’s security teams tried capturing them, but it was bizarre: to a man, they’d escape. However secure the cell, however well guarded, each one cut a path of dead staff and destroyed equipment out of the facility. The doctor wasn’t trying to contradict their death

prediction; he was just keeping them there until the reactor was complete, fully intending to let them go. But the universe bent double to give them early release, at a horrific cost to the project and its staff.

Jeth wasn't a vindictive guy, but everything came second to the reactor. So he hired Ex to start finishing off everyone they captured. You can guess what his name's short for.

As soon as I got to my office and read the e-mail from Di, I called her. Then, as the phone was ringing, I realized that this was going to make it obvious that I hadn't read the results properly when she showed them to me, and she was going to wonder why. I almost hung up before remembering she had caller ID—I think she even had a ringtone for my extension—and prank calling her would be even worse.

*Shit shit shit shit shit shit—*

"Hey!"

"Hey. VICTORIA FALLS?"

"Yep!"

"The guy in cell six dies of VICTORIA FALLS?"

"I know!" She said brightly. She loved the specifics.

"I don't think we have a Victoria Falls here. I don't think we have a Victoria Falls anywhere outside of Zimbabwe."

"And Zambia, I think."

"Really?"

"It's the same one; it's on the border."

"Oh." I felt dumb for not knowing something I had no reason to know.

"So what do you think, field trip?"

Ah, now, this was tricky. Did I want to fly to Harare with her on a private jet and see the largest waterfall in the world, then kill a guy on it? I absolutely did. But did I want to be the creative director of mortality who wasted a huge amount of time and money by taking a prediction at face value? No. I wasn't sure I wanted to do this job much longer, but I felt I should keep doing it properly until I officially quit.

"I'd love to, but there's probably an easier way." Genius! Pretend she was offering, and then turn her down! *Wait wait wait wait wait wait—*

"Oh, okay. Talk to you later."

*Shit.*

###

Di wasn't Di's real name either; she just worked in Diagnostics. Among many other things, she was the one who tested any hostiles Security captured, to find out how they'd die.

At first, they were all GUNSHOT WOUNDS and BLUNT FORCE TRAUMAs. Simple jobs for Ex. But then the U.S. military started sending unkillables, and that's when things got tricky.

It's rare, very rare, but every now and then someone with a slip that says TOOLSHED is willing to sign up for wet work. That means they've got an agent in the field who cannot possibly die in the field, and that's a scary thing to deal with.

Ex would try his best, but without fully comprehending the implications of directionally agnostic causality, it ended with a lot of burned-down toolsheds and escaped agents.

That's why Dr. Jeth hired me: I'd written a paper in the 2060s called "Tweaking Inevitability: How to Change Your Fate in a Way the Universe Is Mostly Okay With." My job was to take a result like VICTORIA FALLS, and instead of thinking "We have to take him to Zimbabwe and/or Zambia," figure out an easier death we could do right there without proving the machine wrong.

Before I ever let Ex strike a blow, I had to be sure that if the subject died the way we were trying to kill him or her, it'd make sense for the machine to have said what it said. If you try to contradict a prediction, things go wrong. And they go wrong in painfully unpredictable ways.

After an awful few minutes in which I tried not to think of anyone on staff called Victoria, I realized the name didn't have to belong to a human. All we needed was a living thing large enough to kill when dropped from a great height, and it could be anything it made sense to name.

There isn't a lot of info on this island online, so I looked up the nearest big one and flicked to fauna. Tapirs. We probably had tapirs. A meter high, two meters long, and anything up to three hundred kilos—easily enough biomass to crush a human being. I would catch a tapir, name it Victoria, and have Ex drop it from the south mast onto inmate six. The world would continue to make perfect sense.

I don't know what I was expecting, but the result that afternoon

was not pretty. It worked, of course, but as Victoria the tapir fell uncomplainingly to her death, I felt a stomach-twisting worry that there might have been a better way. The sound made me flinch.

Once you get used to the machine, the deaths it predicts don't factor into your ethical judgment calls—the death is already out there, waiting to happen. But the collateral damage stands out more, and that afternoon it stood out all over the place.

With classic bad timing, Di joined us on the roof.

“There you are!” Then she saw it. “Oh, wow, what happened here?”

I looked meaningfully out to sea, hoping to impart some gravity to the moment. “Victoria fell.”

She glanced up to Ex, harnessed to the mast thirty meters above. He waved. She waved.

“I had a question about that one, actually. I realize it's a bit late now, and I know you know a lot more about this stuff than me, but Dr. Jeth legally owns the island, and...” She seemed to have second thoughts. She's always had this bizarre impression that I'm some kind of intellectual heavyweight, just because I've written a white paper.

“What?” I tried to ask it encouragingly, even as that knot reappeared.

“Couldn't you have renamed a waterfall?”

*Fuck.*

When you work with predictions long enough, you start to think a little too laterally. I weaseled out of it with Di using a few long words, but she was right—that would have been perfect. I hadn't been on my game for months, and now that the reactor was getting close to completion, it was starting to worry me. I think my head had already moved on, but my body was sticking around to see the project through.

If it wasn't for Di, I might not have stuck it out. But something about her presence here seemed to validate the whole thing, to hide the supervillainous overtones and illuminate the possibilities.

Jeth had an unnatural talent for nuclear physics. Should that be a crime? He didn't like governments. Who did? How smart do you have to be before cynicism counts as villainy? And oh, God forbid you become independently wealthy enough to buy an island. Suddenly it's the Island of Dr. X, and the press can't refer to you without using the word “lair.”

VICTORIA FALLS wasn't a hard one—I used to resolve slips like



HEARTBREAK in an afternoon without killing so much as a puppy. I'd bungled VICTORIA, but I'd make up for it—the rest of the list Di had given me was going to be easy. Whoever selected these guys for the mission was an amateur, or they were saving their less killable unkillables for later.

In general, the more adventurous and exciting their death, the easier they are to kill. If you're on an assault squad with a guy who's going to be EXPLODED, that's your first man down. HEART ATTACK is going to be a tougher cookie, but he could still go at pretty much any time.

The real badass of the team is going to have something like ALZHEIMER'S. That son of a bitch can eat bullets and drink jet fuel; the universe is not letting him die until he forgets his granddaughter's name and how to put his dentures in.

So Dr. Jeth handpicked most of his key staff partly on the basis of their predictions: none of us die in an exciting way, so we're all tough to kill. Every time we're attacked by someone with a sexier death, luck comes down uncannily on our side.

It was activation day, the event that would both realize Dr. Jethmalani's dream of solving the world energy crisis and simultaneously kill him. So we'd all decided it would be a good day to tease him with the stupidest, most trivial questions we could come up with.

I hit the button and the door purred open.

"Mort. I have ninety seconds. What is this regarding?" Jeth's English was good, but he didn't like to use contractions.

"Do we have any doomsday devices?" He stopped typing and looked at me seriously.

"You are asking me if we have any doomsday devices?" I sensed this was a mistake.

"Yeah, I have a prediction here that just says DOOMSDAY DEVICE. I guess the Israelis thought you'd have one, and this guy would destroy it and die in the blast."

"Do you know what a Lazarus Reactor is, Mort?"

"Not in any real sense, no, but I realize it's not a doomsday device."

"So what you are asking me is if, in addition to developing sustainably free power for the planet via nuclear transmutation, I am also simultaneously preparing to destroy the same planet with a separate invention?"

“Well, I just thought if we had one, I could get Ex to hit the guy really hard with it, and that’d probably count.”

Jeth took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, suddenly looking very old.

“I am about to switch on an experimental traveling wave reactor that will provide enough energy to run several small countries for two hundred years, while broadcasting both the startup process and my full schematics to every nation in the world by live streaming video, shortly after which the initial uranium 235 reaction will end my life.” He put his glasses back on and the tiredness vanished. “Ask Jen in Side Projects and General Villainy.”

“Oh. Good idea.”

He was a hard man to rile.

I was most of the way back to my office when the Klaxons went off. I ran the rest.

My office seals securely—Di and I get to watch any attack play out on the security cameras once we’re both safe, which is scary but actually kind of nice. At least, that’s what happens if the route back to my office doesn’t lead me straight to eight armed commandos.

I burst into the nearest door—the ladies’, it turned out—and listened for their voices.

A low, serious one: “Pancreatic: head down to the labs, check for doomsday devices and deathbots. Rectal: get to the satellite dish on the roof; we need to stop this guy’s live feed before we take him out. Thyroid, you’re with me.”

Holy shit. A whole squad of cancers. A cancer *squad*. This was hardcore—one cancer is like a superhero in that line of work. I’d never heard of a whole team of them before. They must have been holding them back for one last attack on activation day.

A different voice: “Laz, what’s our ROE?”

“Shoot to kill; no one’s going to find these guys.”

I waited until their footsteps had completely died away. Then, pulse heavy in my throat, I slowly pushed open the door.

I found a two-meter-tall special forces agent in bulky black Kevlar pointing a silenced carbine at me. I ducked.

A burst of shots went off, howling angrily off something behind me,

but I didn't feel any hits. I grabbed stupidly at the guy's armored shins, but in trying to both step back and kick me in the ribs at the same time, he staggered. I felt his body slam heavily to the ground, heard his gun clang against the steel floor, and took it as a cue to throw myself on top of him.

"What the fuck?" He spat through an armored face mask as he thrashed under my knees and I fumbled frantically at his sidearm holster. I got the weapon out and pressed it into his chest with both hands, but not before he got an arm out and brought his carbine up into my neck. The silencer was a centimeter from my skin, and it felt like someone was holding a candle to my throat.

His eyes, the only part of him not covered up, regarded me seriously for the first time. I think he sensed that luck had done some very deliberate leveling of the playing field here and was trying to determine which of us was more screwed.

At last, he spoke quietly:

"Thyroid. You?"

"I'm thyroid too. Presented yet?"

"No. You?" In a weird moment, he sounded genuinely concerned about me.

"Me neither." My heart started racing. How close was this going to be?

"Okay, what type?" I was afraid he'd ask this. Mine's good, but there are better thyroid cancers out there if you know where to look.

"Follicular," I said with an unsteady attempt at pride. "Five-year survival rate of a hundred percent at stage one."

"Papillary, same."

My pulse quickened. "Stage two?"

"A hundred percent."

"A hundred percent."

I was still summoning the courage to ask when he beat me to it:

"Stage three?" This was it, final round. I held my breath.

"Seventy-one?" I squeaked, one eye shut.

"Ha!" He threw me into the wall and launched into a trained crouch, carbine still pointed expertly in my face. "Ninety-three percent, motherfucker!" He fired.

His weapon jammed. I don't know if this had occurred to him, but the five-year survival rate for a bullet wound to the head is pretty close to zero—it wasn't going to trump follicular thyroid.

I might not have any weapons training, but I do know something about death—enough not to try killing someone who’s not going to die that way. So I shot him, deafeningly, in both shins.

When Ex found me, I was staggering vaguely in the opposite direction from my office, ears ringing from the shots and the screams, hot spots of wet on my arms and face. He’d been running, couldn’t stand still. I handed him the carbine and the sidearm and told him about the cancer squad. He already knew.

“Oh shit, you took out Thyroid? I saw the squad on the cams. I was dreading taking on that motherfucker. My nerd!” He patted me roughly on the back.

“Well, I had help.” It’s a staff rule not to tell each other our predictions, so I left it at that.

“Seriously, that’s a mild fucking cancer. You’ve gotta *try* to die of that.” I let it slide. “Anything on the leader?”

“Just a name—Laz, Raz, something.”

“All right, take these back and get to your office. I’m gonna clean this up.”

I reluctantly took the guns back and stumbled off. Strong hands grabbed my shoulders and turned me round.

“It’s this way, man.”

In my office, I hit the button absentmindedly and jumped when the door slammed behind me. I propped the carbine up against the wastepaper bin, put the gun on my desk with a clunk, and shook both arms—I actually had a cramp from carrying them for three minutes.

I called Di—no answer. I logged in on my workstation, logged on to our extranet, logged through to our intranet, then unthinkingly logged in to my e-mail, remembered I wasn’t checking my e-mail, logged out of my e-mail, then back into the intranet because it had overzealously logged me out, and finally found the option for GPS tracking.

Di’s phone was about four meters outside her office, which was weird. It was moving, which was weird. And she still wasn’t answering, which was weird.

I suddenly felt like everyone was watching: like whatever happened next, it’d be something I’d probably have to justify later, and I was terrified of what they’d think of me when I did. I picked up the gun.

###

It was a three-minute walk or a two-minute run, and I was jogging, so it took me four minutes. And yes, my arms ached, but it was a good ache now.

When I got there, Di was already gone.

I held the gun up in both hands and very slowly peered into her office, but the door was open and it was empty. There was only really one way she could have gone, so I ran—properly this time.

I found her kneeling over an agent twisted into the most explosively awkward pose, a sheathed carbon-fiber knife between her teeth. I fell in love with her on the spot.

“Eeeth fee heerf fath.” She opened her mouth to drop the knife, unloaded the clip from his pistol, and shoved both into the back pockets of her jeans. “Sorry, I had a knife in my mouth.” This was about the only piece of information I already had.

“What the hell happened?”

“I Tased him. But, Mort, we’ve got a problem.”

“Well, the two geekiest people in the building have taken out more of the intruders than our twenty-man security team so far, so I can believe that.”

“Ha! You got one too?” She stood up. “I’m glad you’re okay, by the way.” She touched my shoulder, giving me instant cardiac arrhythmia. “No, there’s another problem: Ex hit their leader, and I tested the blood. Look.” She showed me the readout on her phone.

“Fuck. Fuck! We need to go!”

“I know!”

“Where’s Ex now?” There was a stomach-twisting crack of bone and a scream from the stairs down to the lab. I looked at Di. “I have a theory about where Ex is now.”

“Shit, Mort, that’s him.” Ex had the leader on his front, twisting his arm into shapes that shouldn’t work. I pointed my gun uselessly at both of them, and Di wisely moved out of my line of fire.

“Ex, don’t!” she shouted. “You can’t stop him!”

The moment Ex looked up, a fist smacked him in the jaw with astonishing force. The leader got to his feet, his snapped arm hanging

limp, and shot Ex in the stomach with an ear-stinging crack.

I flinched. Di gasped. The leader ran for her, his gun perfectly level. I didn't think; I just fired.

I swear, there must have been a time when not thinking before you fired was a perfectly sensible way to shave valuable milliseconds off your reaction time. Post-machine, though, it turns out to be a really terrible idea.

Di screamed and fell. My ears rang, my palms stung, my eyes and nostrils burned. The leader holstered his gun without breaking his stride and leapt over her body. It took me a full second to replay the moment in my head and realize that only I had fired—my shot must have ricocheted. I ran to her.

“Fuck fuck fuck I am *so* sorry I am so so sorry!” Why did the walls have to be steel? What is this rule that supervillain lairs can't be made of normal building materials, ones that know how to take a bullet?

She was wide-eyed and white, her cheeks wet, and her left thigh was soaked with blood. As carefully as I possibly could, I held her under the arms and pulled her over to where Ex lay.

That hot buzzing I get in my head when I talk to Di, that pounding I feel in my neck when I'm in a life-threatening situation, the cardiac arrhythmia I get when she touches me...these things stack. My pulse felt like someone was holding a jackhammer to my skull. I might get thyroid cancer later, but I was definitely going to have a heart attack first.

“Ex! EX! EX!” Eventually his head lolled scarily toward me, and he smiled. “How do you die?”

He said nothing, just smiled.

“Fuck the rule, how do you die?” I could feel Di's breathing through her back in my lap—it was fast and irregular.

Ex whispered something I couldn't hear. In a painfully stupid way, I tried to lean so my ear was closer to his mouth. The three of us were linked in the most ridiculous pose: Di limp, me double helix, Ex fetal.

The tiniest voice: “I don't know.”

He suddenly gave a horrible, choking, seventy-year-old smoker's laugh, spitting blood in my ear and half deafening me.

I took his radio. “Security, Ex is down on level twelve, needs urgent help and is being a dick about it. Also, everyone who isn't helping him needs to get the hell out of here. Also, where do we keep the boats so we

can get the hell out of here?”

No reply. I scooped my arms under Di and prepared to lift her. “If this hurts, you have to tell me, okay?”

“OW OW OW OW! Other side, *other* side, you dork!”

Lesson learned: try not to grip a gunshot victim by the gunshot wound.

As she clung clammily to my neck and I carried her up the stairs, I heard Ex lapse into another fit of loud, bloody coughing behind me. And then, hoarsely:

“I think it’s probably this, man.”

It was twelve floors to the surface, Jeth’s broadcast playing on the PA and every screen on the way up. The aching in my arms had gone past the good ache, back to the bad ache, and straight through to the *I would ache, but it’s Di and I shot her, so I’ll shut the fuck up.*

Jeth was pontificating about the significance of what he’d achieved in a way that was in danger of putting everyone off listening to what he’d achieved, and I wished he’d get to the point and die before the agent got to him.

“Mort...,” Di murmured, pawing at me as she was jostled by my graceless stair sprinting. “I’m sorry I called you a dork.”

I almost laughed, but it was tough with no breath. “Well,” I managed between pants, “I shot you...so I think...I’m going to win...this guilt battle.”

“No!” She grabbed me quite painfully. “You saved me! That guy was gonna shoot me in the head.” I had a lot of objections to that, but I saved my breath for the climb. “You’re the reason my slip doesn’t say GUNSHOT.”

“You don’t have to...tell me...”

“It’s ALZHEIMER’S. I’m ALZHEIMER’S.”

I stopped. I could pretend it was in shock, but in fact I just really, really needed to stop.

“Holy shit. The long good-bye? You should be carrying *me.*” I set her down for a second. My shirt was soaked with her blood. She smiled peacefully. Something was happening on-screen.

“Ah, how nice! The United States have sent an ambassador to verify my results firsthand!”

*Shut up, Jeth. Start the reactor before he shows you his prediction!*

“If you are here to kill me, agent, I hope that your name is LAZARUS REACTOR FISSION SEQUENCE, because you have seconds to spare!”

I have told him, repeatedly, not to do jokes.

The leader walked on-screen, snapped arm dangling. I couldn't watch. I scooped Di back up, making her wince, and kept running.

The problem with not watching turned out to be view screens on every floor, positioned at the top of each flight of steps.

The leader didn't say anything, just held something up. You couldn't make it out at that resolution, but I knew what it said. It said LAZARUS REACTOR MELTDOWN.

You also couldn't make out Jethmalani's face as the agent pushed him callously into the reactor, but I had a pretty good idea of what it must have looked like. I've seen a man die of HEARTBREAK.

I lowered Di into the cancer squad's dinghy and looked at the time. They hadn't written “Cancer Squad” on it or anything, but it was jet black and docked haphazardly on the beach, so I figured it was theirs. I looked at the time. I grabbed two radiation suits and a medkit from the supply locker and looked at the time, then pushed its tough rubber prow back into the wobbling water and looked at the time.

There still wasn't any—it had been three minutes since Jeth died in the fission sequence, and the meltdown would happen inside of ten. But two things kept making me check.

One was Ex. I wasn't used to dealing with people who had no predictions, and the uncertainty was paralyzing me. Did it mean I could save him? Or did it mean I couldn't?

The other was the broadcast. Jeth gave his life to send this out, and I couldn't stand the thought of these cancerous assholes stopping it. Whatever happened with the reactor, people should get to see his work. He'd set the schematics to go online just after the reactor started up. If they took out our satellite dish in the next few minutes, nine years of work would end up as free R & D for the USA.

I thought about all these possibilities for three, maybe five seconds, then looked back at the only sure thing. Di, curled up in the dinghy.

I climbed in. I'd spent my career changing the inevitable—for once I was just going to run with it.



As we pattered out into the glinting orange sea, the roof of Jeth's facility came into view. I saw an agent—Rectal?—heading for the satellite dish. At the very edge of the roof, just below the south mast, he slipped on something red and fell out of view.

Four minutes out, I'd helped Di dress her wound and she was sitting up. I found some military rations that included something labeled, honest to God, a "HOOAH! Bar," which I decided I should try before giving to her.

"Oh my God, you can't have this." She looked at me, wide-eyed. "It's delicious!"

A fist hit my leg, surprisingly hard.

At six minutes, it was time. The island was surprisingly small already—six years of my life, so easily shrunk to a postcard. I hauled the radiation suits out and helped her in with her leg. I was about to pull the big plastic helmet up on mine when she stopped me.

"It's going to be a while before we get out of the fallout zone."

"Yeah."

"And once the reactor blows, we can't take these off."

"Not for long, no."

"Is there anything you want to do before we put our heads in plastic boxes for two days?"

I thought about this for a second, then held the side of her face and kissed her.

We both zipped up our suits just in time to see the reactor blow: a column of green radioactive fire, belching black smoke. Di squeezed my hand, our big boxy heads knocked clumsily together, and I tried to think of something romantic to say.

"Well, I guess that's why they all die of cancer."



# **THIS IS HOW YOU DIE**

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Inescapable Machine of Death

EDITED BY  
**RYAN NORTH,  
MATTHEW BENNARDO,  
AND DAVID MALKI !**

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