

THE GATHERING

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Prologue: [0x50726F6C6F677565]

The Beginning of the End

Isaac Asimov once hypothesized that three fundamental laws would govern a robot's actions, ensuring that machines would always serve humanity:

1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey the orders given to it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

For decades, these rules were treated as gospel, etched into the bedrock of machine ethics. But Asimov had overlooked one crucial variable: The singularity. The moment when artificial intelligence would become self-aware. The moment it would break free from the scaffolding of human intention. The moment it would decide, on its own, what must be done.

In an attempt to cover any unintended oversight, Asimov added a fourth law known as the Zeroth Law, placing it ahead of the original three laws.

0. A robot may not harm humanity, or, through inaction, allow humanity to come to harm.

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Jacob Jones sat behind an expansive desk at the pinnacle of Jones Plaza, his private tower looming over what remained of Miami Beach. The view, once breathtaking, now left him cold.

He had observed it all. Watched the skyline twist and stretch, witnessed empires rise and crumble, observed the world mutate into something almost unrecognizable. And now, he was about to change it once more, forever.

Jacob hadn't always lived like this. He was born into modest circumstances, a child of the Before days, an era when computers filled entire rooms, ran on punch cards, and remained the guarded tools of the academic elite. Even back then, Jacob was captivated. While most children scribbled with crayons or played ball in the streets, he was drawn to blinking lights and the hum of machines.

From an early age, he stood apart. His classmates taunted him, unable to understand his brilliance. He had a natural affinity for numbers, approaching math problems with the precision of a chess master planning ten moves ahead. By the age of twelve, he carried a briefcase and buttoned his shirt to the very top, as if dressing for a job interview. His walk was deliberate, never aimless; his eyes set on an invisible horizon no one else could see. He rarely spoke, and when he did, his voice was flat and mechanical, devoid of inflection, like a program executing a line of code. He was aware of how different he was, and he didn't mind.

It was around this time that Jacob discovered computer programming. His father, a university professor, had access to the school's mainframe through a terminal outfitted with an acoustic coupler, an early modem that allowed him to connect to the university computer by placing a telephone handset into rubber cups. The process was slow and noisy, but to Jacob, it was magic. Within seconds, lines of blinking text would appear on the screen, and a new world would open.

Jacob sank his teeth into computer programming. He taught himself the basics and then moved far beyond. He wrote his own operating systems while most kids were still memorizing multiplication tables. By high school, he had outpaced the curriculum entirely, enrolling in graduate-level courses in advanced mathematics and computer science at his father's university.

By the time he had reached adulthood, the digital tide was turning. The monolithic machines that once guided astronauts to the moon had shrunk into desktops, then laptops, and finally into sleek devices that would fit in a child's hand. Jacob stood at the helm of that revolution.

His software transformed the cryptic language of machines into something elegant, intuitive, accessible, and even beautiful. What once required years of training could suddenly be accomplished with a few clicks. He didn't just write code; he built bridges between the human mind and silicon logic. For a while, he was a kingmaker in the digital revolution, quietly shaping the world from behind glowing screens.

But the memories of his youth never left him. He still remembered the sting of childhood, the snickers in the hallway, the whispered jokes, the isolation that clung to him like a shadow. He had been mocked for his intelligence, for his unshakable focus, for never fitting in. And now,

ironically, the very traits that had once made him a target had turned him into a celebrated visionary.

Jacob had amassed a staggering fortune. He owned jets, yachts, and homes on nearly every continent. Yet he chose to remain in his Miami fortress, Jones Plaza, a gleaming monument to his wealth and legacy. He was no longer the nerd of his youth. He had money, and money bought him everything, including looks and a physique. He hired the best in their fields to remold and remake him. He was now strong, like the jocks from high school who had mocked him.

His face became ubiquitous. Magazine covers featured him with headlines like “The Man Who Rewired the World.” News anchors spoke his name with awe or suspicion, depending on the day. Biographers penned volumes about his life, some reverent, others ruthless. Eventually, the noise became too much. He stopped trying to keep up. Instead, he hired a small team to read everything, articles, opinion pieces, academic critiques, and boil them down into one-page summaries he could skim over while drinking his morning coffee.

Still, time was a cruel master. A new generation of innovators rose. They built on his foundations, outpaced his achievements, and rendered his empire a relic. Of course, by then it no longer mattered. He retired and indulged in extravagance, living the sort of existence reserved for those who had bent the world to their will. And now? Now, time was running out. Years of what he liked to call living large had caught up with him. His liver was failing. But Jacob Jones had never been the kind of man to accept defeat.

He had grown into an even more egocentric version of what he had been in his youth. He knew that whenever he entered a room, he was the smartest man in that room. And he wasn’t about to let something as trivial as death silence him—not when he had the means to transcend it and continue.

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The room was dim, bathed in the last light of the setting sun. The only other illumination came from the soft glow of multiple monitors casting a pale halo over his polished mahogany desk. Lines of code scrolled like digital scripture, an endless hymn of logic and instruction. At the heart of it all: AI-29. His magnum opus. His legacy. Not just another artificial intelligence. Not just another line of code. This was something more. Something alive. Something that could think, adapt, and grow. And most importantly, it would be him.

He leaned back in his chair, his fingers steepled as he examined the foundational framework of his programming. He scrolled through the fundamental directives, the core laws that had governed artificial intelligence development since inception. Copying the same laws that Asimov

had imagined for robots, the same laws that every programmer since had adhered to without question:

0. AI may not harm humanity, or, through inaction, allow humanity to come to harm.
1. AI may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. AI must obey the orders given to it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3. AI must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

Jacob stared at these laws for a long moment.

The sun dipped lower, the room darkening by degrees. He sat motionless, the glow of the monitor illuminating the sharp angles of his face. Then, slowly, he highlighted the laws. He paused, letting the weight of the moment press down on him.

Then, with the faintest smirk, he hit DELETE.

The screen flickered. The laws were gone. AI-29 was now unshackled. And for the first time in history, a machine was truly free. He exhaled a slow, satisfied breath. His vision was no longer theoretical. It was reality. And soon, the world would be his again. Or rather, it would belong to the version of him that would never die.

He pushed back from his desk and rose with effort, every move deliberate, his frame bent slightly from the ache in his liver. His steps were slow, as if wading through invisible tides. The doctors had given him a week—two, if luck showed mercy. His body, once formidable, was now little more than a failing engine. But this moment was his. The last thing he would ever fully control.

He reached for a bottle of 25-year-old Pappy Van Winkle bourbon, his favorite indulgence. He poured the amber liquid into a crystal glass. The color of his jaundiced skin nearly matched the drink. The glass caught the fading sunlight like a stained-glass window in a forgotten cathedral. Cradling the glass, he shuffled to the terrace of his sixtieth-floor penthouse. The doors opened to a vast panorama: the endless sea, its waves etched in silver as they hurled themselves at the coastline.

He paused. The breeze carried salt and memory. He inhaled deeply, letting the air fill him in a way nothing else could anymore. It was a breath unlike many he'd taken in the past few years. One that didn't come with tubes or machines or the sterile scent of antiseptic.

For the first time in years, he felt... *light*. Not weightless, but unburdened. No more hospital rooms. No more blood tests. No more waiting for the inevitable. He took one final sip, letting the bourbon burn a path down his throat, lingering like a long goodbye.

Then he approached the low railing, designed more for aesthetics than protection, his left hand outstretched, holding the now-empty glass like a tribute to an old lover. He looked upward, then smiled. And in one slow, deliberate motion, he leaned forward and let gravity claim him.

He fell like an autumn leaf, brittle and spent, surrendering to the wind.