



FROM THE AUTHOR OF 'INTO THE
SINGULARITY'

RIF

A SINGULARITY TALE



JAN KWAN

RIF

Rif stood over the kitchen sink, dressed in his pyjamas. He gulped down the remnants of his hot Milo while his steel-blue eyes, his sole inheritance from his Russian great-grandfather, gazed at the constellations peppering the inky night sky. Life had slowed down considerably since he decided to go into semi-retirement. Now, he only worked four days a week in his clinic and spent the rest of the time writing his memoirs. He was only halfway through and was starting to wonder if anyone would ever read them.

He rinsed the mug and placed it upside down on the rack to dry. Wiping his hands on the kitchen towel, he padded slowly into his bedroom. Switching on the lights, he headed straight for the en suite bathroom and brushed his teeth. In the old days, he would turn on his computer and review the results of his experiments but since he started working part-time, he usually went to bed early after reading the day's news on his tablet.

Tonight was no exception. Rif climbed into bed and pulled the warm, fluffy duvet up to his chin. "Dim the lights and turn them off after an hour," he instructed the home management system (HMS).

"Acknowledged," the robotic female voice said over the speakers.

As per the usual program, the blinds descended and gradually blocked off the city lights from his view. The bright, white, fluorescent glare from the lighting overhead faded into a soft, warm, cosy amber glow that was more conducive to aid REM sleep. Rif sank into his thick pillow and closed his eyes, drifting off into a comfortable slumber. He had just fallen asleep when there was a loud, incessant knocking on the front door.

"Professor Arif Virdow! Open up! Singularity's orders!"

Rif threw off the covers with an irritated frown. He rubbed his eyes and instructed the HMS to restore the white lights. Slipping his feet into a pair of slippers, he headed for the door and unlocked it.

"Oh no, Tiberius, don't tell me it's you again. Look, I am semi-retired now and I am really not the best person to take in an apprentice. Plus, the last guy you sent me was only able to last a year before he quit and joined his lucrative family business," Rif groaned as he opened the door and saw who was standing outside.

A tall, bronze-skinned man with a shocking tuft of white slashing through his wavy dark brown hair pushed past Rif and entered the hallway. He wore a crisp dark blue security agent's uniform with a peaked cap. There were two parallel gold-coloured metal bars on his shoulder epaulettes, signifying his rank of captain. His large hands were placed on a young lad's shoulders, and he propelled the boy ahead of him.

“As I told you earlier, Professor, these are the Singularity’s orders. I am merely the messenger. I assure you though, this boy will definitely be different to the last one. It would be in your best interests to treat him well and train him up to be a world-class healer. The Singularity wants you to come out of retirement as mentors need to be full-time to allow their apprentices to clock in the required number of hours for training. Saying ‘no’ is not an option,” Tiberius said, his eyebrow raised in a mocking arc.

Rif shrugged in resignation. Defying the Singularity’s orders was always an exercise in futility and could lead to further repercussions. But this wasn’t going to be easy. He inspected the trembling young newcomer. The boy was evidently malnourished, with a small and skinny frame. A mop of thick black hair tumbled over his narrow brow. There was a small, torn canvas backpack slung over one shoulder. Tiberius was right. This boy was different to the usual, well-fed, rich and arrogant brats who strutted around in their apprentices’ cloaks and jockeyed for positions on the Council of Healers. He wore a shabby, stained white shirt over a pair of faded brown trousers which were a size too small with hems that stopped above his ankles.

However, the boy’s most striking feature was his clear, almond-shaped brown eyes. They held a frank, enquiring gaze which looked directly yet innocently at Rif’s piercing stare. Rif frowned slightly. This child looked somewhat familiar. Where had he seen those eyes before?

Before Rif could react, Captain Tiberius bowed courteously and said, “I presume that you have agreed to this arrangement, Professor Virdow. After all, it has been three years since your last apprentice joined your practice, so the Singularity has deemed that it is high time you contributed as a mentor again. The Singularity expresses its gratitude. I will take my leave now. Good night, Professor.”

Tiberius disappeared into the night, going as silently as he arrived. Rif looked at the child before him. The boy yawned and scratched an itch behind his knee. Rif closed the door and locked it behind them. He stooped down and asked, “Boy, what is your name? How old are you?”

“They call me Corion Amadeus. I am ten,” the child muttered sleepily.

“Have you had anything to eat, Corion?”

Corion shook his head. “They took me during breakfast at the children’s home, and the captain gave me a sandwich for lunch. I haven’t had any dinner.”

“Come along, then, and I will give you a snack. You must be hungry,” Rif said.

Corion nodded and followed Rif into the kitchen. He perched on a wooden stool with his bag placed beside him on the floor while Rif poured him a glass of milk and put some chocolate chip cookies on an enamel plate. The boy ate ravenously as Rif sat opposite

and studied his face again. That strange sense of déjà vu crept over Rif again. He frowned and stroked his long grey beard.

Corion finished his snack and licked the crumbs off the corner of his lips. He looked at his feet shyly as he said, "Thank you, Professor. I can wash up. They trained us to clean up after ourselves at the home."

The boy stacked up the glass on the plate and brought the dishes over to the sink, where he washed them deftly and dried them with the dishcloth. Rif was impressed. Perhaps the boy was worth investing in; he looked like he would be amenable to training and correction.

When Corion was done, Rif brought him to the lab next door.

"I am afraid I have no separate quarters for apprentices but there is a small room here that you can sleep in temporarily while we sort out your living arrangements. Follow me," Rif said gruffly but kindly.

It was a cramped windowless chamber behind the work benches. A single lightbulb hung from the centre of the room. In the corner, there was a small desk and a chair. A thin mattress was laid out on the bare cement floor.

Corion blinked, looking around at his unfamiliar surroundings. The stale air in the room was sour and damp. Still, it would be the first time that he had his own room. He placed his bag on the floor at the foot of the mattress.

Rif walked over to the desk and wiped off a layer of grey dust with his palm. He picked up a rectangular metallic box from the tabletop and handed it over to Corion.

As Corion received the gadget from Rif Virdow, he felt a slight vibration from the box as though it was pulsating and quivering with life. The gadget beeped and the screen lit up with a fluorescent green glow.

"Corion, this is a tricorder. It is now yours. Your first tricorder. Use it wisely."

Corion bowed, as if he was receiving a precious gift from the Magi. Rif caught a glimpse of the boy's hopeful face and the frozen fortress around his heart started to thaw.

"Your training will commence at six am tomorrow morning. I will meet you in the courtyard for a briefing. Good night," Rif said, closing the door as Corion sat cross-legged at the edge of the mattress and waved him goodbye.

"Good night, Prof." He heard a whisper as the door clicked shut.

Rif went back to bed, locking the door to his quarters. He lay down and closed his eyes but found that sleep eluded him. He tossed and turned restlessly. The boy's eyes haunted him. Who was this boy? Rif slowly drifted into an uneasy slumber.

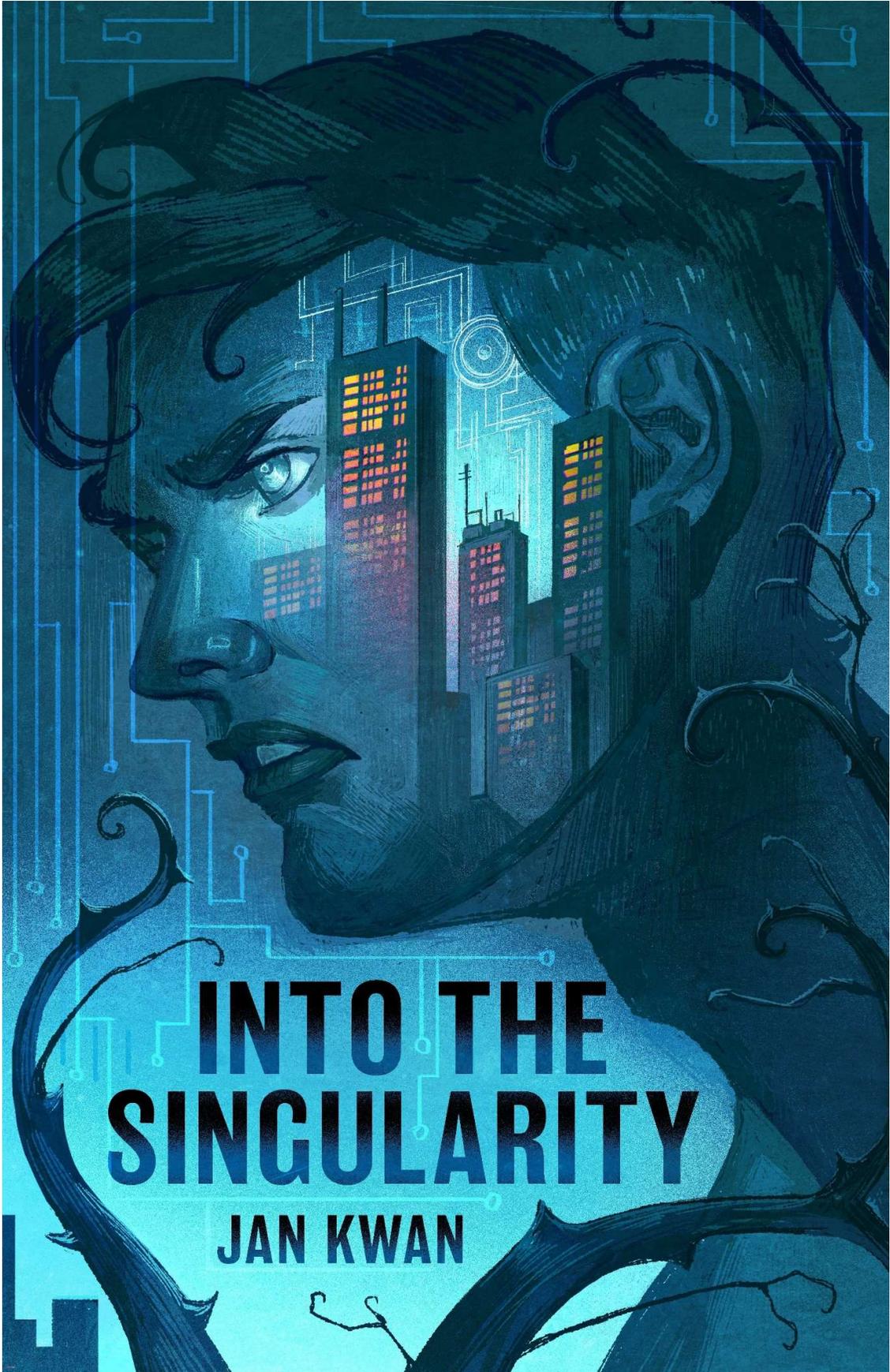
Rif awoke in the middle of the night, knuckles white from gripping the sheets. Cold sweat stained the back of his pyjamas. He sat up abruptly, eyes wide open but staring blankly into the pitch-dark night. The boy's true identity had dawned upon him.

"I know who you are, Corion Amadeus. But don't worry, boy. Your secret is safe with me," he whispered into the silence.



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