

# **Internal Affairs**

## **Other books by Michael Kimball**

*Portals*

*Alligator Bay*

*The Girl and The Forest*

*A House for Molly*

# **Internal Affairs**

**Michael Kimball**

*To ...*



# 1

IT WAS LATE and Jars had the lab to himself. His presence in the building, even at this hour, would raise no questions. He'd worked crazier schedules and the folks in security had long since gotten used to his eccentricities. Besides, he owned the company lock, stock and barrel. Wall Street had been pushing him for years to open the floodgates wide with an IPO and let the rest of the world pour vast sums of money into his bank account. They were all just waiting for him to let them in. Waiting for Jarius Mason, better known to his employees and friends as Jars, to accept all the power that capitalism could supply and catapult his technology engineering firm, Synapzius, to the head of the class.

The company had started off making cardiac resynchronization devices: pacemakers. Not just run-of-the-mill ones, either. The Synapzius pacemaker touted a merging of microelectronic circuitry with a micromechanical device capable of dynamically assessing an individual's lifestyle activities on a real time basis, ensuring no unnecessary pacing of the right ventricle took place. Not only was the device a fraction of the usual size of other units, it provided an unsurpassed level of safety for those active sorts who didn't appreciate a sudden jolt of electricity to their heart in the middle of a game of racquetball or their weekly Zumba workout. Other similarly innovative products, all designed to support the health care industry, were introduced, each one successfully pushing through barriers competitors had been unable to penetrate. Fascinated by the allure of manipulating matter on the atomic and molecular level, Jars had led the company into the nascent field of nanotechnology. Not only were the results hinting at spectacular benefits to medical applications but, connecting the dots, he could readily see profound implications for biomaterials as well. Synapzius could write its own ticket into the future and grow as fast as unlimited funds could propel it. Investors were only waiting for Jars to open wide and let the dollars, euros and other currencies flow in.

If you listened to financial pundits, the delay in Synapzius going public was solely due to Jars' shrewd sense of timing; rumor had it the company was on the verge of yet another mind-boggling innovation. Given the company's track record, initial share prices were being suggested at impressive heights.

The clock on the lab wall reminded Jars that sunrise was only a couple hours distant. Even so, he couldn't imagine falling asleep anytime soon. He was too close to finishing. He chuckled inwardly as he imagined what others might be thinking of his recent marathons in the lab. True, under his direction the company had made great strides and achieved a stunning advance in the area of molecular self-assembly, a breakthrough that had fueled his imagination on quite a different plane. A more personal one.

In the second half of his forties, Jars found himself increasingly dissatisfied with life. He'd tasted the fruit of his labors and, although providing him with enough money to live as he liked, life was wearisome. Even science, the god he had worshipped for as long as he could remember, failed to deliver the high it used to. As for members of the opposite sex, he'd already experienced two marriages—neither of which had worked out. Both had cost him plenty. All he had to show for nearly twenty years of putting up with wives who seem to have only wanted a piece of his reputation was two kids: a daughter from wife number one he saw a handful of times a year and reminded him of a flower child from the seventies, and from his encore attempt at a domestic relationship with wife number two, a son who wanted nothing to do with him.

Most women found Jars attractive prey. As far as external appearances went, he was blessed with a rugged handsomeness hanging on a six-foot-two frame that hinted at time spent in the gym when it really had more to do with eating right coupled with a passion for running. Running was his getaway, transporting him to a place where his mind could think creatively, tearing away supposed limitations confronted in the lab as if they were no more than sheets of paper in an artist's sketch book. His looks suggested something of a slightly more mature version of Christian Bale although Jars lacked the actor's lingering smile. Somewhere along the line, life had burned most of the humor out of Jars leaving behind a permanent glint of cynicism in his hazel eyes.

Although socially adept and comfortable talking with people across a broad spectrum

spectrum of cultures, Jars shunned the spotlight, preferring his intake of humanity to be limited to groups of two or three at a time. Or better yet, one. However, after two misfires, he had serious doubts as to the veracity of the tenet that there is someone just right, out there somewhere in the vast sea of humanity, for everyone. A soul-mate who is a perfect fit and loves us for who we are—sans fame and fortune. For a time, he had contented himself with casual relationships. Usually lasting a year or two, he found the companionship they afforded thin comfort and, in the end, opted to be alone rather than expend the energy necessary to sustain them.

The cumulative effect of life's dreariness, in partnership with Synapzius' recent inroads in nanotechnology, had combined to spark in Jar's imagination a possible way out of the lethargy that dogged at his heels, threatening to pull him under, down to where despair lurked in the dark corners of his being. A despair that wanted to devour him. A foreboding so palpable that, even though he couldn't see, touch, smell or hear it he could swear at times he could almost taste it.

By no means either religious or spiritual, Jars occasionally caught himself wondering if there were *anything* to any of the world's religions. Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity... the world was host to an unfathomable cocktail of religious opinion. Quantum physics was easier to sort through than the various claims presented as facts in the holy writings of the would-be-gods of the universe. If there were a God out there somewhere, then God would have to make himself known and come after him because Jars was about to tempt fate on a daily basis. Despair wanted him and had made itself known, even ratcheting up the volume at which it called to him. If there were a competing interest it had better speak up soon because Jars had just invented the technological equivalent of Russian Roulette: a cardiac resynchronization device that, if triggered, would set loose in his heart a self-replicating molecular machine that would feed on his heart tissue as fuel. The end result would be his own personal ecophagy—a scenario known as “eating the environment”.

Nanotechnology pioneer, Eric Drexler, in his 1986 book, *Engines of Creation*, had hinted at the hypothetical possibility of self-replicating molecular robots consuming all matter on Earth in their frenzy to multiply. Given the power of exponential growth, rapid replication of matter as small as a molecule was impressive. Fear of such a nightmare had

even led Prince Charles of England to call upon the Royal Society to investigate the “enormous environmental and social risks” of nanotechnology. Although the subsequent report dismissed the specter of a consumed Earth as impossible, debate still raged as to threats associated with nanoterrorism and other misuses of the technology. The key to safety lay in controlling the replication; limiting it to only specified fuel. That’s where Synapzius had achieved a breakthrough. With Jars guiding their research teams, the company had come up with a self-replicating molecular robot that was specifically tied to two critical components within its source of fuel: a particular organ and an individual’s DNA—negating the horror of an out-of-control, doomsday scenario. The only possible fatality in the experiment Jars had in mind would be one Jarius Mason.